

the golden king

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by [maladaptivewriting](#)

Summary

When Regulus Black woke up in 1991 after he was supposed to die twelve years prior, he realized two things. One, the locket he had worked so hard to steal had never been destroyed so the Dark Lord was still alive. And two, Harry Potter, James Potter's son, was in danger.

OR

Regulus goes to school with the Golden Trio.

Notes

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- Translation into Português brasileiro available: [The Golden King](#). by [tsukiways](#)

the cave.

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter: mentions of child abuse and torture, some graphic violence, vomiting and drowning



Regulus was going to die.

Of course, he had always known that he would die one day, but it always seemed like some faraway prospect, some untouchable idea that he never bothered to contemplate. He was safe, he was capable, he was unafraid, he was an idiot. He should have known this day would come, but he was an idiot, nothing but a sheltered child.

A sheltered child no longer.

He knew his death was coming. He knew the moment that Kreacher came back and told him what happened. He knew the moment he realized what the Dark Lord was hiding. Sometimes, he thought that he knew the moment he'd let the Dark Lord brand him. However, the concept of his death didn't fully set in until he felt the first brush of cold water against his arm. He'd thought that he had accepted his death, had even felt comforted by it, but as nails began to tear at his flesh and water began to fill his lungs, he wondered if he should have fought to survive a little harder.

The Dark Lord asked to borrow his house elf only a few short but eventful months after he graduated from Hogwarts. Regulus allowed the Dark Lord to borrow Kreacher because what other choice did he have? One didn't say no to the Dark Lord unless they wanted to meet a painful end. Kreacher was missing for a long time, two full days, but when he finally returned, he was shaking and throwing up all over his feet. Regulus had never seen a house elf get ill before, especially not to the point of vomiting on the floor. It disturbed him deeply. He did his best to care for Kreacher, using his limited skill to nurse the old elf back to relative health while hiding him from his parents.

Once Kreacher was well enough to speak, Regulus asked him about what happened. He did not demand it of him but waited until Kreacher felt comfortable enough to share. He hadn't commanded Kreacher to do anything in a long time, always asking and waiting rather than forcing his actions. His mother always called him weak for that. He never knew if she was right.

He listened carefully as Kreacher described the cave, the water filled with dark creatures, and the potion he was forced to drink. Kreacher had been left there to die, discarded like a piece of rubbish. The Dark Lord hadn't known that Regulus told Kreacher to always return to him no matter the circumstances. The Dark Lord had tried to kill Kreacher, he'd nearly succeeded, and Regulus couldn't let it go.

Regulus spent the next few weeks researching the object that the Dark Lord was hiding. The Dark Lord had let it slip that it was an object of great importance, and based on Kreacher's limited description, Regulus knew the object had to be something made of exceptionally dark magic. Considering the Dark Lord had gone to such trouble to hide the item, he knew it could not be a weapon. Otherwise, the Dark Lord would have kept it nearby. It had to be something that could be kept out of reach, something that needed a permanent and safe place.

He also researched the potion Kreacher was forced to drink. He found it quickly, the Black family library had books on all kinds of dark and dangerous potions. The Emerald Potion, or the Drink of Despair, caused extreme physical pain and thirst, as well as hallucinations and fear. It caused the drinker to grow weak and powerless, though it was unclear how long these effects would last.

Regulus wasn't able to find any accounts of a person taking the potion and surviving for very long after. Kreacher was able to fight off the side effects due to his elvish nature, but a human? That part was unclear. It may cause death for everyone who drank it, for all Regulus could guess. At least it seemed like most poor souls that had taken the potion in the past died shortly after, usually by the hand of the person who made the potion — a pity killing.

Regulus tried to come to terms with the fact that the potion may very well kill him. At the very least, he tried to come to terms with the immense suffering he would have to endure to steal the object. He had never been good with pain. If he survived, it would be a long road back to health.

Once he discovered what a Horcrux was, he knew he would never make it out of that cave. The potion and the inferi, it was all meant to keep a thief there permanently. The Dark Lord wouldn't risk setting a trap that could be escaped from, not if he could control it, and Regulus wasn't one to underestimate someone so powerful. He knew he would have to go into the cave and drink the potion to steal the Horcrux, and after, he would succumb to the potion or kill himself to escape its punishment.

There was a small, shameful part of him that wanted Kreacher to drink the potion again, but he shoved that aside with all the self-hatred he could muster, a considerable amount given the last few years of his life. He thought maybe Kreacher could pull him out of the cave, but he knew from the beginning that anti-apparition wards made by the Dark Lord himself would keep him there. Not to mention that if he made it out, he would be hunted down for his betrayal. Killed, if he was lucky, but more likely tortured into insanity. His family would

follow, no doubt. When the Dark Lord learned of the betrayal, his mother and cousins would be tortured and slain. And who knew where the Dark Lord would stop, who else he would go after to punish Regulus? The thought twisted in his stomach like a deadly poison. Regulus couldn't risk it. He wouldn't risk it.

In the end, it couldn't be helped. That was the thought that Regulus settled on, at least. He briefly considered contacting his brother, but it had been so long since they last spoke. That last night before Sirius escaped. Sirius would never believe him, and even if he did, Sirius thought he was beyond help, beyond saving. Of course, Sirius was right. Regulus had lost his chance at salvation a long time ago. He thought about trying to tell... well, he mostly tried not to think about trying to tell *him*.

There was no guarantee that either of them would even hear him out long enough for him to speak. They would probably kill him on sight these days. No, he was alone, just like he always wanted, and his death was on the horizon. It couldn't be helped.

He repeated this in his head as he walked to his death. *It can't be helped*, he thought as he organized his room for the last time. He wouldn't be returning, but he couldn't bear to leave a mess. *It can't be helped*, he thought as he wrote his final letter.

To the Dark Lord, he wrote, grateful that his hand wasn't shaking. *I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more.* - R.A.B. He wondered if the Dark Lord would even know who 'R.A.B.' was or if he would one day read the letter with nothing but confusion.

It can't be helped, he thought as Kreacher apparated him to the entrance of the cave. The cold ocean air cut through him in an instant. He hadn't worn a cloak. The warmth wouldn't save him. *It can't be helped*, he thought as he cut his hand and summoned the boat to take him over the water. Honestly, the Dark Lord was more dramatic than Sirius. *It can't be helped*, he thought as he gave Kreacher his final instruction.

"You will force me to drink the potion, then you will take the Horcrux and go." Kreacher shook his head violently, tears in his eyes. Regulus didn't like forcing Kreacher to do things, but there was no room for error here. Kreacher needed to follow through. "Tell no one what happened here tonight. Mother will ask you where I am, but you are not to tell her. Destroy the locket, please."

Kreacher made an awful choking noise. Regulus ignored it.

He took a steadying breath and drank the first sip of the potion. He was surprised by its almost pleasant taste, he expected that a potion of such torture would taste bitter, but instead, it tasted like a floral tea. It only took a few seconds before the potion's effects took hold of him. He was only able to drink one more cup of it before his hands shook too badly to do it himself. Kreacher forced the next cup down his throat.

"Please," Regulus begged against the ache in his bones. Kreacher was gone, though; in his place stood Orion, Regulus's father.

“Be thankful that you are not smart enough to disobey me,” he said. “If you disappoint me, Sirius will suffer for it.” His father spoke in the stern voice that always flooded every room with a dark cloud. His father was like smog, the way he permeated every space he entered, never screaming like his mother, but staying as a constant reminder of what he could do.

“Please, no more,” Regulus begged him. He never begged his father for anything. Once as a child, he witnessed Sirius begging for food after his mother locked him in his room for several days without it. His father slapped Sirius across the face so hard that Sirius blacked out. Regulus ran to him, but one look from his father stopped him in his tracks. He froze under that dark glare and never begged again, not that Sirius learned the same lesson. But now, he had no choice but to beg. The potion made his veins feel like they were fighting to disentangle from the rest of his body. He burned and shivered and ached and, finally, he begged. “Please.”

“You must understand,” Orion responded. “You are the heir now. You have to act a certain way. If you do not, I will make sure you never make the same mistake again. We cannot afford another misstep”

“I don’t want to be the heir,” Regulus said pitifully, choking as the potion was tipped into his mouth. “I don’t want to be head of the family. It’s Sirius, he should be the heir.”

“Do not say that name. You do not have a brother,” his mother spoke; his father had now vanished. “If I hear you mention his name one more time, you will not leave this room for the rest of the summer. He is dead to you, to all of us.” His mother was always so combative with Sirius. Not that she wasn’t combative with everyone else, including Regulus, but Sirius seemed to spark a unique form of hatred from within her.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus said hoping she would leave him be. Sometimes she would follow through on threats even if he didn’t do anything else wrong.

“Anything the Dark Lord asks from you, you must give him. Do you understand?” his mother asked, forcing another cup of potion into his mouth. Regulus sputtered at first but eventually managed to swallow it. “Anything.” Regulus felt bile rise in his throat. The look in her eye when she spoke was so demented that Regulus felt like he was being skinned alive.

“He’s crazy,” Regulus whispered. He didn’t want anyone to hear him. The Dark Lord could never hear him. “I can’t do what he asked. He’s insane.”

“You’re just like the rest of them,” Sirius spat.

“Please, brother,” Regulus begged. His mouth was so dry, his voice croaking painfully when he tried to speak. Sirius had to understand, that he was trying to do the right thing, he was trying to fix it.

“James is my brother,” Sirius said, a look of pure rage marring his face. “You are nothing to me. Nothing but a waste of my time.” Regulus could feel hot tears against his cheeks.

“Please, no,” Regulus begged. “It’s me, I’m your brother. Please, Sirius. I’m sorry.”

“I can’t even look at you,” James spoke, his voice low with betrayal and hurt, his eyes both glassy and hard, resolute.

“No,” Regulus said weakly. Not James, please, not James.

“I loved you, Regulus. How could you do this?” Regulus felt like those words had once been spoken with great sorrow, but now they were said with anger, with hatred. *Loved*, past tense, the worst word in the English language.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus tried to say, his voice coming out as a raspy whisper. “Please.”

“It’s not enough, Regulus,” James said fiercely. “You’re not enough, not anymore.” Regulus didn’t want to hear anymore and the potion had stopped coming. James was gone then, and Regulus was alone. Thankfully and horribly alone. He was so thirsty, desperate for water. He crawled and crawled, dragging himself along the stone floor.

But the water brought only pain. Dead hands began to claw at his skin, dragging his drained body deep into the depths of darkness. The scratches along his cheeks and into his eyes caused him to scream out, but he heard nothing. Water filled his lungs, a painful burn that destroyed him from the inside out. In his final moment of clarity, he wished he had fought harder, that he had run away with Sirius, that he had stood up to his parents, that he hadn’t taken the mark, that he had let James save him.

He woke to the feeling of nausea rolling through him, his body shivering against the cold. He dragged himself along the dark rocks, the room black and empty. He barely moved before he was forced to vomit up what tasted like water, blood, and bile. He was frozen, his body drenched in icy water, and his muscles throbbing painfully. He collapsed on the rocks, thankfully not in his own vomit, and let the exhaustion take him for a while.

He didn’t know where he was or what was going on. He tried to think about what he was doing before this, but the only thing he could remember was pain, fear, and water. He drifted in darkness, but he couldn’t tell if his eyes were open or closed. He kept trying to open them, to find out where he was, but it was only black that greeted him.

“Kreacher,” he tried to say. His voice was scratchy, and it hurt to speak, but he needed help. “Kreacher,” he said a little louder. “Kreacher, help me.”

He could feel the exhaustion claiming him once again. He surrendered to it, desperate for a moment of respite from the torture he was experiencing. The last thing he heard was a shaky voice saying “Master Regulus” right into his ear.

The next time Regulus opened his eyes, he was at home in his bed. He had never felt so grateful to wake up at Grimmauld. He often felt claustrophobic in the house after Sirius left, though he kept that specific opinion to himself rather than risk punishment. However, at that moment, there was nowhere he would rather have been than at home. He tried to move, to sit up, but his body rebelled against him. He was made of pain.

“Kreacher,” he called and was shocked to hear the voice that came out. It was more high-pitched than he expected, too high-pitched. “What?” He spoke again. Why did he sound like that? He tried to recall what he was doing before he went to bed, but his memories were fuzzy like he was trying to access a dream, the harder he tried to remember, the more the memories slipped away.

Before he had too much time to spiral, there was a popping sound, and Kreacher appeared next to him. Kreacher looked old, older than the last time Regulus had seen him, more tired and worn out perhaps. He had always been a wrinkly thing, old by the time Regulus was born, but now he looked like age had eaten away at him. Like the very act of living was too much for his small body.

“Master Regulus is awake,” he said in his gravelly voice.

“Will you bring me a pain relief potion?” Regulus asked. He cringed at the high-pitched voice that came out of him, but for the moment his physical pain took priority. Kreacher popped away and popped back a second later with a small vial. Regulus gulped it down quickly, already feeling the potion work to soothe his stressed muscles. With the painful cloud clearing in his head, he finally had a chance to wonder about what was going on. “What happened?” he asked.

These seemed to be the magic words to break Kreacher because the moment Regulus asked, Kreacher broke down in tears. He was blubbing and shivering violently, his small hands gripping onto Regulus’s arm as he stood at his bedside. Regulus thought he caught the words “poison” and “locket” and “dead,” but it was hard to make out through all the crying.

“Kreacher, calm yourself and tell me —” Regulus cut himself off as the memories of the cave flooded back into him. The Horcrux, the potion, the pain, his father, his mother, Sirius, James, the thirst, the water, the hands, it all came back in a flash and Regulus suddenly understood why Kreacher was so upset. “How am I alive?”

“Master Regulus told Kreacher to leave him behind, but then he called Kreacher back. Kreacher listened to Master Regulus,” Kreacher said around a few more sobs. Kreacher was clearly distraught. Regulus knew he would be, being forced to leave his master to die could not have been easy.

“How? I didn’t think that you could apparate me out of the cave,” Regulus said.

“Kreacher could not apparate an adult,” Kreacher answered and gave Regulus an indecipherable look. Yes, Regulus was young, only eighteen when he went into the cave, but he was still an adult. Yet the look Kreacher was giving him made him wonder if maybe there was something he wasn’t being told.

“What?” Regulus asked, his brain still working too slowly to form a full response.

“Master Regulus is not how Kreacher left him,” Kreacher said mysteriously.

“What do you mean, Kreacher?” Regulus reached his hands up to feel his face. He remembered the feeling of the claws against his eyes and the skin of his face, but he didn’t

find wounds beneath his fingertips. His skin was soft and unmarked.

“Master Regulus must look at himself.” Regulus sat up immediately, thankful that the pain relief potion had done its job so that he could move freely. He jumped out of bed and made his way into his bathroom. The moment he looked in the mirror he understood what was wrong.

He was much shorter than expected for one, though that was hardly the most pressing issue. He was young, far younger than he should be, maybe ten or eleven. It was hard to gauge exactly. He had always been small for his age, much shorter than his classmates and Sirius; he hadn’t hit a growth spurt until the age of fifteen.

“Kreacher, I don’t understand,” Regulus whispered, touching his face in wonder. His tiny fingers brushed against his skin. He looked down at his hands in wonder and confusion.

“Kreacher does not know, Master Regulus. Master Regulus has been gone for a long time.” Regulus whipped his head around to look at the elf, who was rubbing his hands together anxiously, the way he did when Regulus would ask Kreacher to disobey something his mother had explicitly told him to do. It wasn’t something he had seen Kreacher do in a long time and it immediately put Regulus on edge.

“How long have I been gone?” Regulus asked. Kreacher gave him a long look before answering.

“Kreacher left Master Regulus twelve years ago.” Regulus suddenly felt very disconnected from his body. *Twelve years*. He had been in that cave for twelve years, and he came back as a child? None of it made sense. He felt his knees buckle below him, but he barely registered it, falling to the floor and curling up in a tight ball. How was this even possible? How could he have survived at all? Was this some bizarre afterlife? It felt so real, but he wondered if this was a punishment or perhaps a hallucination right before he succumbed to death.

Kreacher forced a calming draught down his throat, and it was only then that Regulus noticed that he was having a panic attack, his breathing dangerously close to hyperventilation. Regulus had a lot of them the year following his break up with James, and Kreacher had become exceptionally equipped to help. Once he drank the potion, he slowly began to feel normal again. The sound of Kreacher saying ‘twelve years’ kept playing over and over again in his head.

What must everyone think? Surely, he was declared dead after he went into the cave. He expected that to happen, the family trees would update by magic, but did they ever update if he came back to life? Did they look for him? Did the Dark Lord ever discover how he died or why he went missing? What became of them all? And most importantly, what became of the Horcrux?

“The locket?” he asked first, trying to limit the scope of how much he didn’t know. Kreacher immediately burst into tears again, sobbing uncontrollably.

“Kreacher tried to destroy it, Master Regulus. He tried everything he could think of, but it could not be destroyed.” His words were difficult to understand through the painful crying.

“Where is it?” Regulus asked distantly once Kreacher had stopped wailing.

“Kreacher has kept it safe, Master Regulus. Kreacher has hidden it.” So if the locket was not destroyed, that meant that the Dark Lord was most likely still alive. Like a knee-jerk reaction, Regulus shoved up the sleeve of his shirt, a pajama shirt he noted, though he had no memory of dressing himself in it, and found nothing but smooth, unblemished skin. He hadn’t been marked. Of course, he wasn’t. He didn’t receive the mark until he was sixteen.

“Kreacher, I need to know what has happened since I left.” There was so much he didn’t know. What became of his mother? Did the Dark Lord target his family after he was gone? What happened to everyone else? Were they still fighting against him? Was Sirius? Was James?

James. What had James thought when Regulus disappeared? Did he mourn him? *Unlikely*, a snide voice said in his head. He probably felt relieved, if he even thought of Regulus at all. Would he be surprised to find out that Regulus was still alive? Regulus forced the thoughts away; he had no way of knowing yet, and the questions were doing his head in. Kreacher looked just as overwhelmed as Regulus felt.

“Is Mother here?” he asked. It seemed a more pressing question than whether the Dark Lord had looked for him. Surely, he wouldn’t know that Regulus just reappeared, unless his mother had contacted him.

“Mistress died many years ago. Kreacher tried to help her, but she was sick once Master Regulus disappeared.” So his mother was dead. He was surprised that he felt no sadness. Yes, his mother was a monster in many ways, but she was still his mother. Yet all Regulus felt was relief that she was gone. The thought that she grew sick after he disappeared was surprising to Regulus. It was likely that the death of her last heir brought too much shame for her. He doubted it was because she cared about him. He had given up that notion a long time ago. A foolish boyhood hope that his mother might love him as a mother should.

“Who owns this house then?” he asked. He tried not to think about it before but now it seemed pressing. He was unsure of who would take his place as heir after his death.

“The filthy blood traitor was made heir after Master Regulus left,” Kreacher answered, his voice venomous and hateful.

“Sirius?” His brother was restored as heir? Had his mother been that desperate? Surely there were others in line behind him. He wondered what his brother thought when he disappeared. He must have found it hilarious when Regulus’s death led to his reinstatement to the family. Though Sirius was always quick to shed the weight of the Black family from his shoulders, Regulus always did wonder if he would regret it one day. Turns out that Sirius never needed to behave, or fall in line — Regulus only needed to die.

“Kreacher has not seen him, he is locked away with Mistress Bellatrix.” Kreacher’s voice took on an air of sadness when he mentioned Bellatrix.

“Locked away?” Regulus asked, his eyebrows furrowed. He didn’t like to think about Bellatrix, especially Kreacher’s love for her.

“In Azkaban, Master Regulus.” Kreacher sounded regretful and sad while saying it, but Regulus was sure that sadness only extended to his cousin, not his brother.

“Bellatrix is in Azkaban? *Sirius* is in Azkaban?” Regulus could hear his voice rising in panic again, but the calming draught seemed to ground him enough to keep going. “Why? What happened?”

“Kreacher does not know. Filthy blood traitor returned to the Dark Lord, Mistress said.” His brother had turned sides? When and how did that happen? His brother had spent so much of his life opposing everything the Dark Lord stood for, and then he went to work for him? Was he forced? Or perhaps *imperiused* or tortured into it? Was the draw of reclaiming his position in the family enough to sway Sirius?

“When did this happen?” Regulus asked, his voice taking on a nervous, anxious tone despite the calming draught.

“Many years ago, Master Regulus.” This seemed to be Kreacher’s designated answer. Regulus wondered how long the house elf had been alone in Grimmauld and how long it had been since Kreacher had spoken to another living being. Regulus put that aside for the time being, there were more pressing matters.

“And the Dark Lord?” Regulus asked regretfully, he almost didn’t want to know.

“The Dark Lord was destroyed.” After that, Regulus lost the plot again. It took him far longer than was proper to return to any kind of coherent thought, and by that point, Kreacher seemed too fearful to answer any other questions Regulus had. In the end, Regulus requested that Kreacher bring him every copy of the Prophet that they still had in the house, which ended up being just about every single one published up until the death of his mother.

It was reading through those that made Regulus wish he had never crawled out of that cave. The Dark Lord had targeted James’s son and had gone to their house based on information given by Sirius. Sirius, who was James’s best friend. Sirius, who called James his brother. The Dark Lord killed them, James and Lily, but he could not manage to kill their son. *The Boy Who Lived*, they coined him. James was dead, his James was dead. Or not his James, he corrected. Lily’s James. He thought of the last conversation he had with James, that night in the Astronomy Tower when Regulus confided in him about the cowardly choice he’d made, when Regulus showed him the mark branding him for life, and James had yelled at him for the first and only time. He thought of the look in James’s eyes as he broke Regulus into tiny, little pieces.

James went to Lily after, which Regulus knew was coming. James had always been infatuated with Lily, and once he was free from Regulus, the two of them came together, as they were always meant to. Regulus remembered watching them from afar, his heart falling into the soles of his feet as he watched James kiss Lily’s cheek or watch Lily laugh brightly at something James whispered in his ear. He knew they had gotten married, that happened before he went to the cave, but he didn’t know they had a child, a son. Harry.

A son who apparently destroyed the Dark Lord, at least temporarily. There was no way that he was truly gone, not if the locket still existed. Regulus found it later in the house. It was

cold to the touch, so cold that it almost burnt his skin, and the first moment he held it, he could hear James yelling again. He put it back in the parlor eventually, deciding to keep his distance until he knew what to do with it.

It took almost a week for him to recover from the cave. Constantly reading up on what happened after he disappeared definitely prolonged his recovery. Reading about Sirius's betrayal was the worst of it all, somehow worse than discovering that James was dead. Sirius had betrayed them, then attacked his friend, Peter Pettigrew, killing him and twelve muggles in the process. He stared at the picture of Sirius's manic laughing face for what felt like hours.

How could he have done that? The Sirius that Regulus knew would never have betrayed them. He felt sick to his stomach every time he thought about it, and then, eventually, he felt rage. It was easier to feel rage than it was to feel the wretched desolation that came with knowing that, in the end, Sirius was just as bad as everyone else in their family. He wanted to strangle his brother. How dare he kill James? It was nearly too much to handle, Regulus felt like he was drowning in the anger.

Some moments he would start drowning in denial. Not Sirius, he couldn't. He wouldn't. But then who else? He would picture Sirius, his moving photo in the *Daily Prophet*. His brother had gone mad. That was the only explanation. In his moments of rage, he wished that he had never helped him escape. He should have let his mother kill him. Everything he thought about his brother, or about James, he felt like he disconnected even further from himself. He struggled to believe that he was alive, and not just a ghost who'd returned in his childhood form. He didn't leave his bed for a few weeks after his first meltdown. He felt weak and, admittedly, afraid of what the outside world held. He was just lucky that Kreacher was there to take care of him, otherwise he would have rotted like the corpse he was.

Eventually, as the days dragged by, he realized that he needed to put his feelings about everything aside if he wanted to move forward. He couldn't continue on as he had. He used his well-honed Occlumency skills to build up a wall between himself and what Sirius had done, a wall between himself and James's death, a wall between himself and the life he'd sacrificed needlessly.

He needed to focus. The Dark Lord was still out there somewhere, the locket still existed, and he needed to destroy it. And if what he had read was any indication, then James's son, Harry, was in danger. At first, he wondered if perhaps Harry had died later, at some point after his mother's death, but when he had Kreacher go out to get the most recent Prophet, he knew Harry was still alive. It was front-page news that the Boy Who Lived would be attending Hogwarts that year. It was this information that helped Regulus create a plan. He had no idea why he had survived the cave and even less of an idea of why he suddenly looked like he was eleven years old, but regardless, he intended to use it to his advantage.

The Dark Lord must still be in hiding. It seemed his body was destroyed when he tried to kill Harry, and without the locket, Regulus wasn't sure that he could be properly revived. Regulus needed to kill him.

The first time he left his room was a full three weeks after he woke up in bed. The house was dusty and dark. Though it had always been a dark place, the dust and dankness were new. He wondered why Kreacher had allowed it to fall into disarray, but decided not to mention it. It was clear that the decade had been very hard on the house elf, and Regulus had no desire to make that worse. His deceased mother's portrait on the wall was the biggest shock though. She spotted Regulus as he was coming down the stairs.

"Regulus?" She asked, her voice filled with shock and awe.

"Mother," Regulus greeted politely. He was still dressed in his pajamas, he remembered his mother once locking him in his room for a full day because he left it without dressing like a proper pureblood. She didn't seem to notice now though.

"You're alive," she said with a sharp smile. "I should have known. My only son. You look so different from the last time I saw you." Regulus felt unease creeping up his back, he desperately wanted the conversation to end. "Oh, how I've missed you, Regulus."

Regulus forgot all his pureblood training at that moment. His mother had never been kind, even in a false way to lead someone into a trap like most Slytherins would. She would never have said she missed Regulus, even if she was alive to witness his miraculous reanimation. Regulus couldn't stand another moment in her presence. He left as quickly as possible.

"Regulus," his mother called. "Regulus, please come back dear." Regulus had to suppress a shiver as he made his way into the kitchen. He wondered when she had the portrait made.

Portraits were only a reflection of who a person was when they were living and even that was limited. When a magical portrait was brought to life, the person painted would be made up of what the painter knew about them. The more people who painted and animated the same person, the more accurate the portrait versions became. But if only one painter cast the spell, then that person's portrait would be limited to only what one painter knew. It was clear that his mother was limited in this way. Even those who claimed to like her when she was alive would not have described her in the way she was presented in her portrait. He wondered how she would act in the presence of someone other than him.

The first time he left the house was on a trip to Gringotts. He didn't have any real clothes that fit him, but Kreacher had saved his wand and thankfully, it still worked, so he transfigured himself an outfit out of one of his old robes, shrinking it down to size. He was surprised that his room and clothing remained clean despite the dishevelment the rest of the house was experiencing. He wondered if Kreacher had cleaned all his things when he came back or if Kreacher had kept them clean in the intervening years like a person worshipping at a shrine. Regulus didn't ask — he wasn't sure he wanted to know — he only dressed and ventured out of the house.

He'd come to the conclusion that attending Hogwarts was the only way to protect Harry. If he was going to protect the boy, then he needed to be where Harry was. Not to mention that outside of Hogwarts, he looked like an unsupervised child. He wouldn't be of much use in the wizarding world, not yet. He didn't think that he would show up in the registry again, which meant he had to work out a way to get an acceptance letter. The solution to this problem was brought up to him by Kreacher.

Kreacher told him that he was still part of the family magic, as Kreacher was still compelled to obey him. It was the only reason that Kreacher was able to hear his call in the cave. However, Kreacher told him that he had been removed as heir and may or may not have access to the family vaults and property. The goblins, Regulus knew, were some of the best beings to deal with unusual magic, often having experience that wizards could not even fathom. Regulus's first task was to make his way to Gringotts to add himself back to the family.

"Hello, I need to speak to the goblin in charge of the Black family vaults," Regulus said, his small voice sounding comical to his ears as he attempted to speak with authority.

"And who are you?" the goblin asked, leaning menacingly over the counter. The goblins had fascinated Regulus as a child, he often asked to visit Gringotts with his parents whenever they went just so he could watch the creatures. Now they just intimidated him.

"I am Regulus Black," he responded. After that, the goblins seemed to spring into action. He decided to trust the head goblin in charge with his near-death experience, leaving out anything to do with the Dark Lord or his locket, but explaining how he had disappeared for twelve years, coming back in the body of a child. The goblin wouldn't share his secret. Goblins hoarded secrets more intensely than they guarded wealth.

The goblin was stoic throughout Regulus's explanation but Regulus wasn't surprised by this. Growing up in the family that he did, Regulus expected others to hold their emotions and information close to the chest. If anything, it made it easier for Regulus to confess the bizarre order of events that led him to seek help at Gringotts.

"I need to find a way to attend Hogwarts a second time," Regulus said finally.

"It may be possible," the goblin answered. *For a price* was left unsaid. Regulus would need the goblins to help fabricate records of his existence, lying to the Ministry and Hogwarts. It was a difficult thing to manage and it would not come cheap.

"How?" Regulus asked, brushing passed the insinuation. If he had access to the family vaults, then he would have no problem paying them.

"You would need to be someone other than you were," the goblin responded simply like he was answering a riddle.

"Yes, that is obvious. But who?" Regulus asked, trying his best to keep his small voice even.

"Perhaps the child of someone in your family? Someone that others could not question?" The goblin had a particular glint in his eyes that Regulus had only seen when someone he knew had just come up with a dangerous scheme. It reminded him of Sirius when he was still young before he left for Hogwarts.

Oh no. The realization of what the goblin was implying was unpleasant at best, and downright horrid at worst.

“He is unreachable in Azkaban, and he is the head of House Black,” the goblin argued before Regulus could even respond.

“You want me to pretend to be my brother’s bastard child?” Regulus asked incredulously.

“I do not want anything, but you will need an identity in order to get a letter from Hogwarts,” the goblin answered. “And seeing as Regulus Black II has already graduated, it will have to be someone else. They will know who you are related to regardless of your relations.”

Regulus sighed deeply. His brother, the one who left him in that rotten, claustrophobic house, the one who disowned Regulus as his brother and replaced him with James, the one who betrayed James and led him to his death.

“Fine,” Regulus said unhappily. The goblin was right, no one else would be able to reach Sirius in Azkaban. If he was the only son of the Head of the House then that gave him access to the vaults, which he would need in order to pay off the goblin to keep this all a secret. It was the only logical answer and given Sirius’s reputation when they were in school, it wouldn’t be unheard of that he would have a bastard son. Of course, that meant Regulus would be known as a bastard by all the other pureblood children at school, but needs must, he supposed. He needed to protect Harry Potter.

So Regulus left Gringotts that day not as Regulus Black II, born to Orion and Walburga Black in July of 1961, but as Regulus Black III, born to Sirius Black in July of 1980. He felt ridiculous pretending to be the son of his brother, but it did provide him with the perfect cover for who he was. By the time he woke up the next day, he had his acceptance letter in hand for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

the sorting.

Regulus got access to the Black vaults after he met with the goblins, so he could purchase new school supplies the next day. It felt a little strange to be re-buying books that he had already read and studied. He was glad that Kreacher had taken his wand before he died. He thought that maybe he'd given it to him in his final moments, but he couldn't be sure. Regardless, he was happy that he still had his old one. He didn't think visiting the odd fellow Ollivander would be very fun in his new form.

Revisiting Diagon Alley at all was surreal. He watched as small children — children who now looked his age, he supposed — ran around, trailing after their parents and guardians. Regulus knew he stood out, dressed in immaculate robes and walking all alone. He tried to speak to as few people as possible, but he could feel their curious eyes on him.

He purchased his supplies quickly, pausing only for a bit to linger in front of the Magical Menagerie, staring in as children and teens of varying ages talked excitedly with their parents about what pet they were going to get to bring to Hogwarts.

“Are you going in?” a woman asked him, pointing to the shop.

“Oh, no,” Regulus said politely. “Sorry.” She gave him an odd look but stepped around him to enter. It took him a few minutes to realize the look was pity. He wondered if his look of longing was a little too obvious.

Regulus had never been allowed a pet at school, even an owl. His father had always said that he didn't want to risk his children getting attached to a creature. He couldn't deny that he would have been very attached to any pet given to him. He'd always been a bit soft. He almost wanted to get one now, but he decided against it. Perhaps one day in the future, but not this time around. He looked once more at the regal owls perched in the window before heading off back to Grimmauld.

He knew he would have to be careful not to draw too much attention to himself in classes. Most of the spells and potions he learned during first year he could do wandlessly and wordlessly at this point. He had years of practice, and if he wasn't careful, he would stand out too much in classes. He needed to pretend to struggle with spells so that he would blend in with his peers, otherwise, someone might become suspicious. He wasn't worried about the other students, eleven-year-olds were hardly the most observant bunch, but the professors — especially the professors he had already been in class with — could put him at risk of discovery.

He purchased a new trunk, worried that his old one would draw unwanted attention. His old one had had a huge painting of the Black family crest on the side, his initials branded into the front. It was ostentatious, meant to assert his wealth among his fellow students. Though his initials hadn't changed this time around, he still didn't want one that held such value.

He packed the trunk himself, Kreacher lingering in the room and watching him resentfully. It was customary for house elves to do that kind of task, and clearly, Kreacher felt robbed that

Regulus wasn't letting him participate.

"I just want to make sure I have everything," Regulus said by way of explanation.

"Kreacher can make sure that Master Regulus has his supplies," Kreacher said unhappily.

"I know that," Regulus said with a quiet sigh. "I promise I'll let you do it next time." Kreacher seemed displeased with the excuse, but he didn't say anything. He was far too proper for that.

He apparated himself to King's Cross bright and early on the morning of the first of September, realizing only after that perhaps he shouldn't be openly using magic as an underage wizard, especially something that required a license. He resolved to be more careful.

Even though he was now registered for Hogwarts, it thankfully didn't seem like the trace had been reactivated. He had tried it out the moment he received his Hogwarts letter, only a few days after his visit to Gringotts. The wards on Grimmauld were so thick with magic that anything he did inside the house, even when he was underage, would never have been picked up by the trace, so he walked out into the street and tried casting a simple *lumos*. There was no reaction, though Regulus wasn't surprised. He wondered if the magic of the trace would even work on him or if it would recognize him as an adult rather than a child. Regardless, he could use his magic freely, but other adult wizards would grow suspicious if they saw an eleven-year-old apparating on his own.

He arrived very early for the train and quickly found an empty cabin, casting a subtle *Notice Me Not Charm* on the door. He wasn't interested in interacting with anyone on the way there. He knew he needed to find and befriend Harry Potter, at least befriend him enough that he could watch out for him, but he didn't feel like that was pressing enough for him to find Harry on the train. The last thing he wanted to do was overwhelm him and scare him off. Not to mention that he was a bit nervous about meeting James's son.

He tried to do as much research as possible on the child, but the information available was very limited. It seemed like he had been raised with muggle relatives, Lily's no doubt. After James's parents passed, he had no other living family. But beyond that small tidbit, Regulus knew very little about Harry Potter.

He was a mystery to the wizarding world, no doubt only increasing the awe and worship he inspired from people. He wondered how a child would handle that kind of fame and admiration. He thought of the way James and Sirius would relish in the applause of others, the way they sought out the spotlight, always drawing attention to themselves. Regulus expected Harry would be similar to that, though Lily was always understated, keeping to herself most of the time except when she was yelling at James and his friends. She seemed very pragmatic, at least that's what Regulus thought based on his limited awareness of her. Perhaps Harry would be the same.

So, he did not plan on introducing himself on the train, he felt that that would come off as too desperate. Harry might feel hunted if Regulus sought him out too early. Not to mention, he did not want to have to interact with any other children who might question who he was, or

any children on the train at all if it could be helped. The Black family name was very well known in the wizarding world, and if he ran into any purebloods, they would have questions about who Regulus was and where he came from. He decided that he wanted to limit the queries until he arrived safely at Hogwarts.

He was worried about the professors recognizing him once he was there but was hopeful that the Black genes would outweigh any questions they might have. He and his brother looked very similar when they were growing up, nearly identical except for Sirius's height advantage and long hair, so it wasn't completely unreasonable to assume that Sirius's son would look the same. He hoped that would be enough to dissuade them from questioning his identity. He did his best to grow out his hair a bit in the month before school began. When Regulus started his first year during his first life, he had very short, cropped hair, far shorter than he ever wore it after that year, so he aimed to hide in plain sight by trying to appear more like Sirius.

He had invented a backstory for himself in the weeks leading up to September. He decided that he would tell people he was the child of Sirius and a French witch named Seraphine Bissett. His 'father' was never in the picture, and Regulus was raised by his 'mother' in France. Regulus, like all members of the Black family, spoke fluent French so it seemed like a likely enough story. He didn't expect anyone to go beyond this limited explanation; he would tell them he just returned to England a few months ago, which was why no one knew of him. It was enough for now.

He watched the hoards of children flutter around with their parents, saying goodbye and piling into the train. He didn't recognize anyone at first, not that he expected to. It was only when he saw his cousin, Narcissa, that he remembered she had a son. Narcissa had married Lucius when Regulus was in his third year and he knew they were trying for a child. He had seen the name Draco Lucius Malfoy on the Black family tapestry shortly after he came back, but it hadn't registered to him that this child would also be at school with him.

This added a slight complication, as Narcissa would no doubt recognize him, but he hoped that he could avoid running into her. She had been his favorite cousin growing up. Andromeda, before she was disowned, had always loved Sirius, the two of them were always thick as thieves. Bellatrix was a difficult person, even in childhood, and Regulus spent most of his time around her, worried that she would attack him. Narcissa seemed cold to some, overly proper perhaps, but with Regulus, she was soft and kind. He always loved her. He wondered idly how Narcissa had reacted to his death, though he didn't dwell on the morbid thought.

It wasn't long after he saw her that the train was pulling away from the station. It hadn't been that long since Regulus rode the Hogwarts Express, but to him, it felt like years and years had passed. He supposed that it had, considering that it was 1991. But really, so much had changed since Regulus boarded the train for his seventh year.

For one thing, he wasn't a marked Death Eater any longer. He remembered the train ride back to school after he was marked, the Dark Mark still burning on his skin, the ache of shame still weaving throughout his thoughts. He wasn't as weighed down by the expectations of his parents or burdened by the abandonment of his brother and James now either as he had been on the train before seventh year, the only year where Sirius and James had already graduated.

Of course, some things had not changed. He still felt an enormous responsibility, though now it was self-imposed. His goal to kill the Dark Lord for good weighed heavy on his thoughts. He knew it was dangerous, but he figured that, at this point, he had nothing to lose. He had already died once trying to kill him, what was one more time? He no longer had any family to protect from the Dark Lord's vengeance, as he had in 1979. Perhaps he would have worried about Narcissa, but so much time had passed that he doubted she would be made to pay the price for his betrayal, especially considering her loyalty to her husband Lucius. Lucius had managed to slither out from under the conviction other Death Eaters had gotten, arguing that he was imperiused and forced to serve. The Dark Lord would take revenge on him regardless of Regulus's choices.

Nor did he have to worry about the safety of James, who was already long dead, though Regulus did his best not to think about that fact. Sirius had sided with the Dark Lord in the end, so Regulus couldn't care less what became of him. No, he was free to find and kill the Dark Lord in a way he had never been in his first life.

He wasn't sure why he had been given this second chance, but he did not intend to waste it on anything except the Dark Lord's destruction. He knew there was a high probability that he would fail or possibly die in the process, but as he kept reminding himself, he had nothing holding him back anymore. He was already living on borrowed time, and he had no qualms about losing his life. He had already done it once, and he could surely do it again.

The world outside the train passed quickly and before he knew it, Regulus was arriving at the station in Hogsmeade and getting out to convene with the other first years. He nearly walked over to the carriages with the older students but managed to catch himself at the last minute. He loaded into a boat with three students he was sure he didn't recognize and listened as they chatted with each other excitedly, but he did not engage. Instead, he sat back and watched as Hogwarts came into view across the black lake.

The first time he had made this journey he had been filled with anxiety and dread, worried about his sorting, whether he would end up in Slytherin and make his mother and father proud, but isolate his brother or whether he would be sorted somewhere else and face the same abuse that his brother endured over the summer. Now though, he found that it was like looking at Hogwarts as the fortress that it was.

Hogwarts had been a refuge when he was a child, a way to escape his parents even for a little bit. He never rebelled like his brother did, but he did feel like he could breathe easier when he was there. It was different this time around, but the feeling of refuge was still there. Harry would be protected at Hogwarts, at least better protected than he would be with his muggle relatives who were defenseless against magic. Who knew how he had survived this long? All Regulus had to do was make sure he stayed that way.

He stood around with the other first years waiting for Professor McGonagall to return and bring them into the Great Hall. He overheard a few students discussing how they might be sorted, and he could practically taste the nervous energy building in the air. Entering the Great Hall for the first time was surreal, his chest tightening uncomfortably as some indecipherable emotion flooded through him. He listened as the other children around him gasped in amazement, their experiences unmarred by their past. Regulus kept his head down

the entire walk up to the front, trying his best not to draw attention to himself from the staff and the older students.

The Sorting Hat sang a long song about the houses before the sorting began. It was much more tedious when he was anxious to get the sorting done with. It was like his first life all over again. He was sure he didn't hear a single word of the song the night he was first sorted, too focused on the uncertainty in his head to hear it. Honestly, Regulus had completely forgotten about the singing, but it was interesting to hear that it hadn't changed.

McGonagall stood tall before them, a list of students written out on parchment before her. She had the same stern look that she always had but with a few more wrinkles. He wondered if the years had been hard for her. He never spoke to her much during his first life, only interacting when he went to classes. He wondered if she would recognize him.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted. Abbott, Hannah!" McGonagall said. One of the girls who had been on the boat with him stepped forward. She looked nervous, anxiously gnawing at her lower lip, but she didn't hesitate.

The Hat was only on her a moment before it shouted, "Hufflepuff."

She jumped off the stool with an excited smile, prancing over to the Hufflepuff table, where she was greeted by her new housemates.

"Black, Regulus!" She didn't falter when she said his name, but he noticed the double take she did when she glanced down at him. Her eyebrows furrowed just as whispers erupted around them. He wondered if it was other purebloods wondering who he was. Most of them would know of his family. He tried to ignore them, but it was hard to miss the curious look he caught from Headmaster Dumbledore.

Regulus lifted his chin proudly, letting the whispers roll off his back the way Sirius might. He walked to the front confidently and sat down on the stool, McGonagall immediately placing the Hat on his head.

"Regulus Black," the Hat said as it fell over his eyes. *"Back again, I see. It is uncommon that I get the opportunity to sort a child twice."*

"Uncommon, but not unheard of?" Regulus asked.

"It has been known to happen," the Hat said evasively. Regulus's interest was piqued. *"Now, let's see. I sorted you into Slytherin last time. An easy choice, you not only belonged there but practically begged for the placement. But now..."*

Regulus waited patiently, his stomach twisting at the memory of him begging for Slytherin. He remembered his first sorting well, especially how terrified he was of being sorted anywhere but Slytherin. He knew his brother would react poorly, but Regulus had never been able to disobey his parents, too afraid of what they might do to him. Growing up as the spare, he was always disposable, and he worried what his parents might do if he went against their wishes. Sirius had called him out for it immediately, ignoring him for two full days after the sorting, only to eventually corner Regulus and accuse him of purposefully betraying him.

Regulus had denied it, yelling at his brother, but the shame of the truth always stuck with him.

It wasn't terribly important where he was sorted this time around. He didn't know where Harry Potter might end up, though probably Gryffindor if his parents' houses gave any indication, but Regulus felt confident that he could get to know the boy regardless of his placement. It was odd now to be so unbothered by the sorting, but there was no one left who cared what happened to him. Regulus Black was dead, this new version was all alone in the world. If the Hat didn't sort him into Slytherin, then it hardly mattered where else he ended up.

"You no longer belong in Slytherin, I do not believe it would suit you well," the Hat pondered. Regulus agreed though he still remained silent. He was never a very good Slytherin anyway. *"You have a good mind. Last time I briefly considered putting you in Ravenclaw. But no, your bravery is what I see now. Bravery will serve you well, Regulus Black, and you need a place to cultivate it."* This was a surprise to Regulus, of all the options, the one he least expected was Gryffindor. He did not consider himself brave. This didn't stop the Hat, though. *"Better be... GRYFFINDOR!"*

There were some gasps around the room and a few moments' pause before cheering erupted from the Gryffindor table. Regulus took the Hat off and noticed a few curious faces in the crowd, but he rushed off to the table as quickly as he could. He sat down and briefly acknowledged a few older students, not even taking in the names that were spoken to him, before glancing back up at the front of the room.

It was only then that he noticed the stricken look on Professor McGonagall's face. He wondered if she was thinking of Sirius and his noteworthy sorting into Gryffindor. He knew she had a difficult relationship with Sirius and his friends, but he thought she always had a soft spot for them. Was she thinking about Sirius's betrayal? Did it haunt her the way it was haunting him? He looked away quickly, unwilling to stare back at her as openly as she was looking at him.

He watched with mild interest as the other students were sorted. Draco Malfoy, Narcissa's son, was sorted into Slytherin the moment the Hat touched his head, no surprise there. When Harry Potter's name was called, the entire Great Hall dropped into silence in anticipation. It seemed to take longer than expected for him to be sorted.

Regulus thought he might be arguing with the Hat, but it was hard to be sure with the way it fell over most of his face. When it finally shouted Gryffindor, the table seemed to erupt in shouts and cheers so loud that Regulus thought he might lose his hearing. Harry Potter was greeted with handshakes from every student that could reach him, and to Regulus's surprise, he seemed deeply uncomfortable with the attention. That was interesting. James had always thrived on attention, the very definition of an extrovert. Regulus wondered if perhaps Harry got more of Lily's personality, rather than James's.

Harry must have noticed Regulus watching him because he gave him a very shy smile and looked away quickly. He looked so much like James that, for a moment, Regulus felt like he couldn't breathe. He tried his best to shove away the memories that threatened to drown him, but his chest remained tight for the remainder of dinner.

The rest of the sorting was uneventful and Regulus barely spoke to anyone as he waited for it to be finished. He looked at the professor's table, trying to see which ones were new and which ones he recognized. He had not been expecting to see Severus Snape staring at him with a burning intensity. Regulus had not realized that Snape would be teaching at Hogwarts. If Regulus had to guess, he would have expected Snape to be dead before he expected him to teach children. Not to mention that Snape was a Death Eater. How did a Death Eater manage to not only escape a prison sentence but also land a job as a professor at Hogwarts?

Yet there he sat, eyes glued to Regulus like he was a riddle Snape must solve on pain of death. This complicated things a bit. Regulus hadn't known Snape very well in school, they certainly hadn't been friends, but Snape would still likely recognize him. Even if he didn't, Snape vehemently hated Sirius, so Regulus did not expect to be treated well by the professor when he realized that Regulus was Sirius's son.

"Ouch!" Regulus heard Harry say suddenly. He looked over and noticed that Harry was holding his fingers against his forehead.

"What is it?" asked an older student, he had bright red hair like many of the Gryffindors around them.

"N-nothing," Harry answered and dropped his hand. Regulus had read about Harry Potter's infamous lightning scar, but it was different seeing it in person. He hadn't noticed it at first, blocked by his curly hair, sticking out like a rat's nest on his head, but the scar scattered down his forehead, starting at his hairline and separating into smaller lines down into his eyebrows. It was still red and looked almost fresh, a cursed scar then, Regulus determined.

"Who's that teacher talking to Professor Quirrell?" Harry asked. Regulus looked back over and noticed that Snape had adjusted his glaring so that he was staring at Harry now. Harry looked nervous, and a line of discomfort deepened between his eyebrows.

"He teaches Potions, but doesn't want to — everyone knows he's after Quirrell's job," Regulus caught the tail end of what the older Gryffindor was saying. "Knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts, Snape."

Well, that was certainly true. Regulus remembered Snape in school drawing a group of friends by showing them violent dark magic curses he had discovered or sometimes invented. He wondered if the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor still changed every single year as it did when he was at Hogwarts. Students would often joke that it was a cursed position.

Regulus didn't talk during dinner, but he listened idly as the first years around him spoke. One of them also had bright red hair to match some of the others at the table and he spoke to a pair of twins on and off while he shoved chicken wings in his mouth. A girl with very curly hair watched him with mild disgust as the food got all over his face. Harry ate like a ravenous creature, adding a little bit of everything to his plate before wiping it clean. Regulus wasn't sure where he was keeping all the food in his tiny body, but the elated look on his face was all Regulus needed to know that he was enjoying himself. Harry watched the redhead boy with a quiet smile, laughing fondly when he talked with his mouth fully open.

After the meal was finished and the food all disappeared, Dumbledore stood up to make his announcements. Most of them were normal, the forest was forbidden, Quidditch trials would be held during the second week of term, and no magic was allowed in the corridors. Regulus was nearly tuning it out when Dumbledore finally said something of interest.

“I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death.” Regulus wondered what that meant. There had never been an announcement like that while Regulus was in school. Why would Dumbledore set up something so ominous and mysterious on the first day of term, and why would they block off an entire corridor? Regulus knew he would have to figure out what was on that floor.

Perhaps the Sorting Hat was right to put him in Gryffindor.

Regulus followed the other students up to the Gryffindor dorm. He had only been to the Gryffindor common room once or twice during his first time at Hogwarts, and he'd never actually seen the dorms. The common room itself was smaller than the Slytherin common room, but it was warm and brightly lit. The stone walls were built into high ceilings and Regulus could see the stairs leading to tiny areas where chairs and tables sat for the students to use.

They marched tiredly up the steps to their dorm room. It was circular, with huge windows on one side of the room. There were six four-poster beds with burgundy curtains hanging off the posts. There was a small furnace in the room, one that was hot enough to warm the entire room despite its small size. Regulus's new trunk was already sitting at the foot of one of the beds, his robes sitting next to the bed, the elves having charmed them to have the Gryffindor colors and emblem on them.

He thought about how Sirius must have felt his first night in the Gryffindor dorms. Was he just as overwhelmed by the massive amount of red-colored items? It was truly overbearing. At least in the Slytherin dorms, it was mostly black furniture and walls. Here, it seemed like every inch of available space was swamped with bright red. He felt comfortable here, he felt oddly at home.

He wondered if it would take some getting used to remembering to come here rather than the dungeons when he ended the day. The other boys in his dorm went to sleep almost immediately after they reached the dorm, and Regulus was inclined to follow them. He was exhausted from a long day of traveling and the huge meal, but the moment he was inside the safety of his bed, he found that he couldn't sleep.

It was so bizarre to think that he was eleven years old again, this time tucked away in the Gryffindor dorms. Sirius had wanted so badly for Regulus to be in Gryffindor with him, but Regulus knew it wasn't going to happen. Even the Hat agreed, only ever considering Ravenclaw before settling on Slytherin. Regulus would sometimes fantasize about what his life might have been like had he been a Gryffindor. He would imagine following his brother up to the dorms, spending time together in the common room, Regulus being welcomed into their friend group. He remembered crying his first night at Hogwarts, thinking about the betrayed and angry look that crossed his brother's face when he was sorted.

He wondered if his life would have been better if he'd been sorted into Gryffindor. His relationship with James would no doubt have been easier. They probably wouldn't have had to sneak around as much, perhaps they would have even told Sirius. Maybe he would have been disowned like Sirius, but then he wouldn't have been marked. Then James would have never left him, and he would have never died in the cave. But of course, he would never have discovered the Dark Lord's secret, so perhaps it would all make sense in the end. He dozed off to the thought, wondering about what James would think if he could see Regulus now.

The next morning was chaos. All five of the other boys were in a whirlwind to get ready for the day. He remembered his first morning at Hogwarts. The room was quiet and subdued, all the other Slytherin boys were used to going about their days with barely any help from their parents. It wasn't uncommon for wealthy purebloods to be raised by house elves, and they typically developed independence early on in their childhoods.

The Gryffindor boys were not like that at all. It was clear that most of them were very used to their mothers taking care of everything, waking them up, getting them clothes, and pushing them out the door on time. Only Harry seemed out of place; he was just as disorganized and frazzled as the other boys, but there was a serious nature to him like he was used to being alone. Regulus watched him curiously but waited to speak to him until they were at breakfast. It was remarkably lucky that they had ended up in a house together.

"I'm Regulus," he introduced himself the moment Harry sat down diagonally across from him.

"Hi Regulus, I'm Harry," Harry responded. Harry was already tense, whispers seemed to follow the boy everywhere he went, and it was clearly putting him on edge. Not that Regulus was surprised, he imagined that all the other wizard students were excited that Harry Potter was attending school with them.

"Just ignore them," Regulus offered as he watched several older students down the table from them whisper furiously as they tried to get a look at Harry's scar. "It'll stop eventually."

Harry shrugged a little, though he offered Regulus a small grateful smile before starting to load up his plate. He greeted the redhead boy from last night, his hair somehow even brighter in the light of day. It reminded him of Lily, though hers was always a slightly darker red rather than the vibrant orange that these children seemed to have.

"Ron, this is Regulus. Regulus, Ron," Harry said with a lazy gesture of his hand.

"Ron Weasley," Ron said. Regulus didn't know many Weasleys. He knew they were a pureblood family, though, in the Sacred Twenty-Eight, they weren't exactly accepted by most of the other pureblood families due to their views on muggles. That was the extent of his knowledge of them. He tried to remember if any Weasleys went to school with him, but didn't think so.

"Regulus Black," Regulus responded.

“Oh,” Ron said and Regulus caught the exact moment that his name registered. “My mom told me about the Blacks. A lot of dark wizards.” Ron’s lip curled up slightly in disgust.

“Ron,” Harry chided. “Sorry,” he added, directing it towards Regulus. Regulus wondered why Harry even bothered, it wasn’t like he knew Regulus.

“That’s okay,” Regulus said, trying to let the statement roll off his back. “Your mom isn’t wrong, but I’m not a dark wizard.” Lie, he thought. He was exactly like the rest of his family, worse in many ways in fact. Ron seemed unsure, but Harry nodded like it had all been resolved. Oh, the simplicity of childhood, where people were either good or bad, and they told you outright where they stood.

“Did you say your name was Regulus Black?” another boy asked him, interrupting their conversation. The boy seemed familiar to Regulus for some reason, but he couldn’t place why. He tried to recall his name, but he didn’t recall almost anyone from the sorting.

“Yes,” Regulus answered. The boy seemed to grow pale. “What’s your name?”

“Neville,” he answered. “Neville Longbottom.” *Oh.*

Regulus suddenly remembered reading about his cousin Bellatrix’s arrest, how she, along with Barty Crouch Jr., Rodolphus, and Rabastan Lestrage, had tortured the Longbottoms into insanity. *Fucking Barty*, Regulus thought. He and Barty had been friends in school, more than friends at times though Regulus didn’t like to think about it. He knew Barty was perhaps less than sane from the beginning. His difficult relationship with his father seemed to constantly egg Barty on, in the same way that Sirius was affected by their parents, except in the opposite direction. Evan’s death pushed Barty closer to the edge of madness. By the time Regulus died, he had all but cut Barty out of his life.

“Right,” Regulus said, suddenly realizing that he had been staring at Neville for far too long and that Neville was now nervously looking down at his breakfast. Ron and Harry were watching the interaction with intense interest. Regulus opened his mouth to say something else but closed it again when he realized he had no idea what to say. He was luckily saved from the awkward conversation when McGonagall came by to give them their class schedules.

“What was that with Neville?” He heard Harry ask Ron on their way to their first class. Ron only shrugged, but Regulus caught him looking suspiciously over his shoulder at Regulus. It was interesting that Ron would be so suspicious of him, not that he was wrong to feel that way, although Regulus wanted nothing more than to protect Harry, he wasn’t exactly a good man.

Being in first-year classes again was just as boring as Regulus expected. He tried his best to keep from showing off in class, but it wasn’t always easy. He realized his mistake in his first Transfiguration class when he completed the assignment immediately, and McGonagall came over looking shocked and, not surprisingly, suspicious. Though he doubted she suspected that he was secretly an adult. He also caught another first-year girl watching him closely and he vowed to be more careful so as not to arouse more suspicion.

Regulus made an effort to sit near Harry when it was an option, though Ron Weasley was almost always hovering nearby. Regulus was pleasantly surprised when Harry found a way to clear the air almost immediately, barging into the conversation headfirst, just like his father always would when something needed to be discussed.

“Why did you react to Neville’s name like that?” Harry asked a few days after their initial conversation. Regulus noticed that Ron was watching him with interest, clearly also curious about the uncomfortable moment. He wondered if the two of them had been discussing it.

“Oh, well,” Regulus stuttered out, caught off guard by how forward Harry was. “One of my family members attacked Neville’s parents,” he answered and, seeing the looks on both Harry and Ron’s faces, hurried to add, “but I don’t know her. She’s been in Azkaban most of my life, but it’s hard to get away from the name. I wasn’t even raised in England, I didn’t know any of my family.” Regulus snapped his mouth shut when he realized that he was rambling, they didn’t need his entire fake backstory.

Harry said nothing as he spoke, just watched him patiently and waited for him to finish his maundering. Regulus felt an unreasonable amount of guilt about lying to Harry. During his first life, Regulus became a very skilled liar, lying to most of the people in his life, and not once did he feel guilt over it. But looking into Harry’s trusting eyes caused a feeling of shame to shoot through him. Not that he had another choice, there was no way he was going to tell Harry who he really was. How did one explain to a child that they were secretly an adult in a child’s body and that they’d come to protect them because they were once in love with their now dead father?

“I don’t blame him,” Regulus said after a long moment, shaking off his thoughts, “for reacting that way, I mean.”

Harry nodded knowingly, he must have understood what it was like to be judged for something you didn’t remember or know about, not that those circumstances applied to Regulus exactly. Ron was silent for a few beats longer before he seemed to accept this as well and after that, the three of them were friendly.

Most of his classes weren’t noteworthy, even in the ones where he had the same teacher as the last time around, the professors barely acknowledged him. This was not the case for Potions. The Gryffindors had their first Potions class on the Friday morning after school started. Up until that point, Regulus had almost forgotten about seeing Snape at the Professor’s table during the Welcome Feast. He sat at a potions table with both Ron and Harry, Harry sitting in the middle of them, and he watched warily as Snape stalked into the classroom and started taking roll.

When he said Regulus's name, he sneered openly at him but kept going on the list. However, when he got to Harry’s name, he paused before saying, “Ah, yes. Harry Potter. Our new... celebrity.”

Regulus noted that a few of the Slytherin boys were laughing at this, Draco Malfoy among them. After that, Snape went on a tirade asking Harry questions that he clearly did not know the answer to.

It seemed unfair to Regulus that Snape would zero in on a child like this, but he should have known when he saw the cold, dark look Snape had given them. A Potter and a Black, together at a table in a classroom with Snape; Regulus thought that maybe Snape was having flashbacks to his time at Hogwarts when James and Sirius were constantly after him. So he wasn't exactly surprised by Snape's reaction to Harry but was surprised that Snape hadn't targeted him at all, but Snape seemed to have trouble even looking in Regulus's direction for too long.

By the end of class, Snape had taken points from Gryffindor for Harry's "cheek" as well as Harry's inability to stop Neville from making a mistake during the potion-making process despite Harry sitting at a completely different table.

To Regulus, it was almost comical, watching a grown man fight for power over an eleven-year-old, especially one that had no idea what was going on, but it was clear that Harry did not see the comedy in the situation. He was practically sulking as the three of them made their way out of the class.

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Regulus told him, bumping his shoulder against Harry's. "Snape probably just hates Gryffindors."

"He seems to hate me the most," Harry said sullenly.

"He's a prat," Regulus said simply. Ron chuckled and even Harry gave a small smile.

Regulus followed the other two boys as they went to Hagrid's after class. Harry had been invited over and asked if Ron and Regulus wanted to come. Regulus did not particularly want to spend the afternoon in the hut belonging to some half-giant, but he aimed to stay friends with Harry, so he wasn't going to let the opportunity pass him by.

"This is Ron," Harry told Hagrid once they'd settled into the oversized chairs around Hagrid's living room, "and this is Regulus."

"Another Weasley, eh?" Hagrid asked Ron. "And a Black," he said, turning his gaze on Regulus. "Who are —"

"Sirius," Regulus answered, already knowing the question Hagrid was going to ask. He had forgotten that Hagrid had worked with Sirius and their band of do-gooders. It wasn't that Sirius and James were friends with Hagrid, at least not to his knowledge, but they were nicer to the groundskeeper than most.

"Right then," Hagrid said awkwardly, a complicated look crossing his face. "A rock cake fer ya?"

It was clear that Hagrid did not want to say anything about Sirius, and Regulus was more than happy about that. He surprisingly found that he enjoyed spending time with the half-giant. He could just imagine his mother rolling in her grave if she could witness this.

Near the end of their afternoon with Hagrid, Harry noticed a *Daily Prophet's* article about a break-in at Gringotts, supposedly on the same day that Harry had been taken there with

Hagrid. On the way back to the castle, Harry told them about the strange object that Hagrid had picked up from the vault that was broken into, and Regulus knew that something was very wrong at Hogwarts.

the troll in the dungeon.

Regulus settled back into a routine at Hogwarts easily. It was almost as if he had never left in the first place.

He was surprised by how comfortable he felt in Gryffindor, though the red ties and Gryffindor robes always pulled darkly at his memories, threatening to bury him the moment he let them in. He managed to keep them at bay easily throughout the day, but at night they always crept through his bed curtains and whispered disturbingly in his ear.

The moment he slept, he would dream of strong hands untying a red tie, touching Regulus in a way that he had never been touched before they slowly started strangling him, dragging him below the cold, icy water of the cave. He almost always woke with a shout in the morning so he had taken to casting silencing spells on his bed curtains so he didn't disturb the others.

He got on well with the other Gryffindor boys, although Neville always kept his distance. Ron had abandoned his suspicion of Regulus almost immediately and welcomed him into his life with an easy warmth. Dean and Seamus had become fast friends with each other, but they seemed to like Regulus enough. He didn't speak much to the Gryffindor girls, but he knew that one of them was keenly interested in his classwork—Hermione, he discovered her name was—but he did his best to downplay his skill when in class, trying to shake her watchful eye.

Harry was always kind, which didn't surprise Regulus at all. Even though he hadn't been raised by James or Lily, or anyone that Regulus had known at school, he seemed to have their spirit and disposition. He tried his best to learn about Harry's home life and the muggles who raised him during the first couple weeks of school, but Harry was always stilted when answering Regulus's questions.

Regulus would give him ample details about his life—fake details, but still.

“My mother didn't want me to attend regular schools, so I've been taught by tutors most of my life. Did your aunt and uncle teach you themselves?”

“Erm... no, I went to a muggle school.”

“Did you like muggle school?”

Harry cringed. “It was fine.”

Every conversation went much the same. It was like de-gnoming a garden, long and tedious with very little reward. Not that Regulus had ever de-gnomed a garden, the Black family didn't even have a garden when he was growing up and even if they did, they would have had house elves to manage it for them, but he'd read enough books to know de-gnoming was a menial task.

As time went on Regulus grew more and more concerned about the boy, there was something off that he couldn't quite put his finger on, but he wasn't sure what to do when Harry was so reticent to give details.

The most surprising element of Hogwarts was Draco Malfoy. Regulus had never liked Lucius; he was always rude and condescending, so he expected nothing less regarding his child. Draco Malfoy did not disappoint. He seemed very interested in everything Harry did and would do his level best to mock him for it. For instance, Draco watched closely to see how much mail Harry was getting each morning, which wasn't very much, actually wasn't any at all beyond a letter now and then from Hagrid, then Draco would ridicule Harry for his lack of letters from home, often gloating about the packages of sweets he got from his mother.

This would not have been out of the ordinary for a son of Lucius Malfoy, except for the fact that Draco Malfoy seemed exceedingly obsessed with Harry Potter. No other child seemed to notice how much mail Harry was getting, even though Harry was one of the most closely watched people in the school—most of the student body was still vaguely obsessed with the Boy Who Lived. Draco Malfoy, on the other hand, watched Harry closely and, in turn, needed all of Harry's attention, it was like he needed Harry to know that Draco saw everything wrong with Harry's life.

"Just what I always wanted. To make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy," Harry grumbled the morning they found out that Gryffindor and Slytherin would have their flying lessons together.

Draco had been bragging about how good he was on a broom, even spinning some tale of escaping muggles in helicopters. Regulus had no idea how Draco even knew what helicopters were given how he was raised. Regulus didn't learn about anything muggle-related until he was a teenager and that was only after he raided Sirius's room after he left home for the last time—even then it was mostly just what naked muggle women looked like, he assumed it was the same for witches though he wasn't a reliable source on that fact.

Regardless, Draco was busy boasting about his flying ability, always doing so when he was sure Harry was paying attention, and Harry was *always* sullenly paying attention to it, stressing about the upcoming lessons. Harry privately confessed to Regulus that he was more excited about the prospect of flying than he was about anything else at Hogwarts. This wasn't a surprise considering James was flying since he could walk, maybe even before that.

"You're going to do fine, Harry," Regulus reassured. "Just ignore Draco."

"What if I'm terrible at it?" Harry whined. The two of them were up late in the common room after the others had gone to bed. Regulus never slept well those days and Harry didn't like to leave his friends.

"You won't be. I bet you'll be a natural," Regulus said. "And either way, it'll be your first time on a broom, so even if you're not excellent, you'll get better, just like you have with every other kind of magic." Harry looked reassured for the most part, but Regulus could tell that he was still dwelling on the fact that Draco would be there watching him.

“Have you ever been on a broom?” Harry asked.

This was a tricky question for Regulus. In his first life, he was not allowed on a broom until he went to Hogwarts. He loved flying once he’d gotten the chance to try it and often spent hours flying around the Quidditch Pitch. He was even the Slytherin seeker for a few years, dropping off midway through his sixth year when the thought of playing Quidditch and seeing James on his broom openly flirting with Lily Evans became too much for Regulus to bear. So he would likely still be a skilled flier and it would be difficult to hide that fact, but he also did not want to add to Harry’s unease.

“A few times, not very much though,” Regulus answered vaguely.

“Really? What’s it like?” Harry asked, a sparkle lighting up in his eyes.

“It’s amazing,” Regulus answered honestly. “The best feeling in the world.” Harry smiled at that, his worries about Draco momentarily forgotten.

Hermione was nervous as well, spending the morning spouting off tips on flying that she’d read in the library. Neville was nearby paying close attention to what Hermione was saying, obviously nervous as well. Regulus didn’t feel like reading about flying would be of much help to someone new to flying on a broomstick, but during their first flying lesson, when they all watched Neville crash to the ground and break his wrist, Regulus wondered if he should have offered to give them more tips.

After Madam Hooch left to take Neville to the Hospital Wing, Draco decided to steal Neville’s Remembrall and, when he saw that Harry was watching him, taunted Harry with it and threw it as far as he could. Regulus watched Harry soar through the air with a wide smile on his face. Regulus didn’t even have the time to stop him. Yes, what he was doing was incredibly dangerous and would most likely get him into trouble, but Regulus couldn’t deny the warm feeling he got watching James’s son take to the sky like the natural he was born to be.

Most of the time, Regulus had his Occlumency walls firmly in place to keep out the thoughts about James. Of course, they slipped now and again, but during the day he was usually good about keeping them up. When they did fall, when a thought slipped through, Regulus often only felt sorrow, an anguishing pain that gutted him the moment he experienced it. Watching Harry fly caused his walls to slip, but instead of pain and regret and sadness and anger, Regulus only felt nostalgic, the warmth of love filling his chest. When he looked at Harry, he felt only pride.

Draco, however, looked more annoyed than ever. It was clear that he’d expected Harry to be a terrible flier, or at least get into horrible trouble for flying when he wasn’t supposed to. This backfired quite spectacularly when Harry ended up on the Quidditch team as a first year—only James Potter’s son could manage something like that—but from that point on Regulus understood exactly what was going on. There wasn’t a moment when Draco and Harry were in the room together that Draco wasn’t watching Harry. And of course, Harry responded in kind by spending an unreasonable amount of time complaining about Draco, usually talking more than he had the entire day just ranting about the boy.

Ron would often encourage Harry, agreeing with him about how annoying Draco was being, but Regulus stayed quiet. He did not want to be involved in the potion fire that was Harry and Draco, and he did his best to stay out of it. Naturally, this became difficult when Draco challenged Harry to a wizard's duel and Ron accepted for him before Harry could even respond.

"This is definitely a trap," Regulus said for the third time that night. He had spent the last several hours listening to Ron give Harry half-hearted advice on how to duel. Regulus offered no such help, he was not about to encourage him by training James Potter's son how to duel. Not to mention that he was sure they were all going to be spending the next several weeks in detention when they were caught out of bed. Still, Regulus wasn't going to let them go on their own. He was sure Draco wouldn't show, but if he did Regulus wanted to be there to make sure no one actually got hurt.

"Shut up already," Ron whispered furiously. "We have to go! It's already half past eleven. If we don't show then Malfoy is going to think Harry's a coward."

"Draco isn't going to show," Regulus responded. "He is definitely setting you both up and we're all going to get detention for being out past curfew."

"He's setting all three of us up, you mean," Ron said nonsensically.

"You don't have to come, you could just stay here," Harry offered, not for the first time. Regulus grumbled at him, but still got up and followed them out of the door. Ron seemed fired up for the potential duel, but Harry mostly seemed regretful that he was even participating in it. Not regretful enough to say no, of course, but regretful all the same.

Hermione was at the bottom of the stairs when they made it to the common room. In retrospect, Regulus should have realized that she would have been listening to them. Especially with the way she watched him.

"You can't be out after curfew," Hermione said sharply. "You'll lose house points! And you'll get detention. Or expelled!"

"Shove off," Ron grumbled, sidestepping her.

"If you go out there, then I'm going to go get your brother Percy," Hermione said, sticking her nose up in the air. She was already dressed in her pajamas—a silk set that made it look like she was wearing a tiny muggle suit. Her curly hair was braided down into pigtails.

Ron groaned. "Go away!"

Regulus and Harry watched them argue as they walked out of the portrait hole, Hermione following them outside so she could continue to lecture Ron. He seemed to get a kick out of riling her up.

"And you, Regulus, I expected you to talk them out of this," she hissed at him.

“What?” Regulus had not expected to be dragged into this conversation. He’d actually been more than happy to stay out of it. “Why would you think that?”

Hermione didn’t answer this question, only gave him a very snobbish look before turning to go back to the common room, only to find the portrait empty. For now, she was stuck with them. Unless she wanted to just sit outside the common room entrance where anyone could happen upon her.

They found Neville outside the common room as well, slightly down the hallway, curled up on the floor. The poor child had forgotten the password and couldn’t get in. The five of them made their way toward the trophy room, far too large of a group for a successful sneak around the castle. Especially considering how far the trophy room was. The castle seemed much bigger now that Regulus was eleven again.

The night went about exactly as Regulus had expected. Draco naturally didn’t show and they were almost discovered by Mrs. Norris and Filch, before being cornered by Peeves. Hermione took the reins when it came to reminding Harry that Draco had tricked him into getting in trouble, saving Regulus the trouble of delivering a, certainly unwanted, I-told-you-so. They sprinted through the castle, picking directions at random to try and evade capture. Regulus couldn’t help but think of James and his brother, of their time as students when they would explore the castle corridors as freely as they could. He wasn’t paying close enough attention to where they were going and they ended up arriving in the forbidden corridor on the third floor. Regulus had yet to investigate it, though it was still on his mind periodically.

He had been wondering what Dumbledore was trying to hide there. It seemed too obvious a spot for something valuable. His mind drifted, unwarranted, to the locket currently tucked away in Grimmauld Place.

They rushed inside stupidly, still trying to escape Filch and Mrs. Norris, and Regulus only realized a beat too late that Filch was probably the better option.

Inside the door was a huge dog with three massive heads, impossible to miss, and Regulus damn near pissed himself. He suddenly felt very ill-equipped to have been sorted into Gryffindor. He wasn’t brave, he was terrified.

He pulled his wand, trying to remember some sort of spell that could fight off a giant, three-headed dog. He was the only adult in the group, though no one else knew that, and it was his job to protect the others but he felt stuck like he couldn’t move. He edged around so he was in front of them, standing guard between them and the ginormous dog growling viciously.

He wondered if he should throw himself at the dog’s mercy—certain death—and let the others escape. Suddenly, he heard them all start to shuffle and fall backward through the door and someone grabbed onto the back of his robes, pulling him with them.

Regulus gasped for breath when the door slammed between him and the dogs' snarling mouths. He was shaking from head to toe, so bad that he could barely hold his wand. His heart was beating so loudly that it was the only thing he could hear.

"We have to get out of here!" Harry said. His voice sounded like it was coming from behind a very thick wall, far away and barely audible, but he grabbed Regulus's wrist when the rest of them started running and dragged him along.

The trip back to the dorm was traveled in a daze. They ran the entire way and didn't stop until they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady. Regulus couldn't believe he had frozen like that. He was supposed to be protecting Harry, and he had failed the moment he was supposed to do it. He was too busy beating himself up to register the conversation the others were having but it hardly mattered. He didn't particularly care why there was a monstrous dog in the castle, that was a problem for another day.

All he cared about was the fact that he was completely and totally useless.

Harry and Ron spent the next day trying to figure out what the package Hagrid had moved from Gringotts was. They had already decided that was what the dog was guarding and Regulus was inclined to agree with them though he didn't say so out loud. However, all they knew about it was that it was small.

"It's either really valuable or really dangerous," Ron said.

"Or both," Harry replied. Regulus thought that was accurate, but he had no further insight to offer. There were so many magical objects out in the world that fit that description. Why Dumbledore would choose to store that item at Hogwarts of all places, Regulus had no idea.

He was beginning to feel overwhelmed with the number of mysteries left to solve, and for the time being, the object being hidden at Hogwarts was not a priority. He knew that he needed to work on figuring out how to destroy the locket, but he didn't think the Hogwarts library was going to be particularly helpful on the matter.

During one free period, Regulus found an empty bathroom and called for Kreacher. Regulus remembered during his first life when he discovered his house elves could come through the Hogwarts wards. He abused that privilege far too often during his final years at school.

"Master Regulus," Kreacher greeted when he popped into existence next to Regulus. He then bowed so deeply that his long, pointy nose touched the floor.

"Bring me all the books in the Grimmauld Library that mention Horcruxes and anything on soul magic," he instructed. "Oh, and any of them that might mention dangerous beasts." Kreacher nodded and by the next night, Regulus's trunk was stuffed full of, most likely illegal, books. He always wondered how Kreacher knew which books to pull. It wasn't like he could read—at least, Regulus didn't think he could. It must have been some elvish magic that he didn't understand.

After that day, Regulus started spending more and more time tucked away in different parts of the castle researching the subject. The books that mentioned Horcruxes ended up only being *Secrets of the Darkest Arts* and *A History of Cursed Objects*. Both of these were mostly useless to Regulus. *A History of Cursed Objects* only mentioned Horcruxes in a footnote when referencing a cursed object that might affect a person's mental state, and *Secrets of the*

Darkest Arts provided only a simple definition for what a Horcrux was, nothing on how one might be created or destroyed.

He wondered how the Dark Lord had found out about them in the first place. He must have learned how to make one from somewhere, but perhaps it was by word of mouth rather than through a book. He figured it would take more trial and error to destroy the locket, something that he couldn't do effectively at Hogwarts. In the meantime, he read up on soul magic, an interesting but not particularly well-researched branch of magic. He also spent more and more time looking up dangerous creatures and though he learned a lot about Dragons, Basilisks, and Chimaeras, he could find almost nothing about large, three-headed dogs.

Time seemed to pass quickly in his second life. It was strange to feel so at ease at Hogwarts, but it was like a tiny sanctuary that made the passage of time easy and uninhibited. Harry was busy with Quidditch practice and Ron almost always tagged along to watch, leaving Regulus alone to study. It surprised him when he looked up one day and found that two months had already passed and that Halloween was upon them.

He worried about Harry from the moment he woke up on Halloween morning. He knew from reading the *Prophet* that Halloween was the day that James and Lily had been murdered and Regulus expected Harry to be upset. He couldn't imagine how it must feel to wake up on a celebratory day knowing that it was the anniversary of when you became an orphan.

"How are you?" Regulus asked Harry as they walked down to breakfast. The smell of baking pumpkins filled the air and Regulus felt a sudden deep longing for his first Halloween at Hogwarts. It was the only holiday spent at Hogwarts where he and Sirius didn't actively hate each other. The bad blood between them hadn't curdled yet.

"Good," Harry answered happily, shaking Regulus from his memories, he smiled but when he noticed Regulus watching him closely he gave him a questioning look.

"Oh, that's good," Regulus responded slowly, watching Harry for any sign that he was lying, but Harry just seemed confused.

"Why?" Harry finally asked.

"Well, it's Halloween. I just thought..." Regulus trailed off, feeling suddenly out of his depth.

"Do you not like Halloween?" Harry asked, a look of sadness crossing his face for a moment like he couldn't imagine not liking a holiday made of jack-o-lanterns and candy and that Regulus had just revealed something terribly tragic.

"Er, it's not my favorite holiday," Regulus responded. This wasn't exactly a lie, though the truth was closer to something like: *this holiday makes me wish I'd never crawled out of the cold, inferi-infested water in that cave, because at least if I was dead, then I would never have to know that James was gone.*

"Why not?" Harry asked, a look of sympathy on his face.

“Just a difficult day, I guess.” Regulus evaded the question. There was technically no reason that he should feel this way, at least no reason that he could share with Harry.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Harry said kindly. Regulus couldn’t tell whether Harry was holding his emotions in or whether he was genuinely fine.

“I expected you not to like it either, I guess,” Regulus said after a moment of hesitation.

“Why wouldn’t I like Halloween?” *Does he not know?* Regulus wondered. All Regulus knew from Harry’s upbringing was that he was raised by muggles, but it seems unlikely that they wouldn’t have told Harry what day his parents had died. Surely they knew that Lily was a witch, why and how she died. Regulus thought about asking, but Harry was already skittish when talking about his home life and Regulus did not want to add to it if he didn’t have to, so he let the subject drop for the time being.

Regulus watched Harry carefully for the rest of the day, but Harry showed no signs of being bothered. Ron, on the other hand, was in a terrible mood. Their morning Charms class was filled with bickering between Ron and Hermione, something that was becoming worryingly common. Ron left the class ranting about Hermione and making snide comments about her lack of friends. Hermione, after overhearing Ron, didn’t show up for any of their other classes that day. He wondered if he should do something, though he didn’t know what.

Soon enough it was time for the Halloween feast and Regulus let himself, if only for a moment, get caught up in the excitement of the day. He had always loved the decorations and the feast at Hogwarts during Halloween. Sitting in the Great Hall enjoying the food, he could almost forget that on this night over a decade prior, the love of his life had been ruthlessly murdered by the Dark Lord.

Regulus's ponderings were interrupted when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the Great Hall screaming about a troll in the dungeons. Regulus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Hogwarts already seemed to be a much more dangerous place now than it had his first time around, what with the barely locked corridor housing a dangerous beast, but now another one had made its way into the dungeon of the school.

Regulus watched closely as the professors headed off toward the dungeon and then began to follow the prefects up to the dorm room with the rest of the students. He stopped when he felt Harry pulling him and Ron aside.

“Hermione! She never came to dinner! She doesn’t know about the troll!” Harry said frantically.

Regulus had barely paid attention to the details of the schoolyard drama between Ron and Hermione that morning in class and he hadn’t noticed that the girl wasn’t at the Halloween feast, even though she’d missed most of their classes that day, but it was clear that Harry had been keeping track. Regulus thought that perhaps warning someone, like a prefect if they could find one, would be a good plan, but before he could suggest it, Harry was taking off running towards the girl’s bathroom, and Regulus and Ron had no choice but to follow.

Harry came to a skittering stop. "Wait," Harry hissed, pulling them behind a statue. Regulus followed, before leaning out to the side just in time to spot Snape heading down another corridor in the distance. He wasn't going in the direction of the dungeons.

"What's he doing?" Ron asked quietly.

"I think he's headed for the third floor, but I don't know why," Harry whispered. Regulus was surprised that Harry had picked up on that but he thought that he was likely right. It was an astute observation.

"Ugh, what is that smell?" Ron said suddenly, covering his mouth and nose with the sleeve of his cloak. The smell hit Harry and Regulus a second later. It was like rotting sewage. Regulus gagged.

He had only encountered a troll once in his lifetime. After Evan was killed by Aurors, Barty became more ruthless and reckless in his dealings as a Death Eater. He began to use Unforgivables more freely and occasionally would bring along dark creatures when they were sent out on raids. Regulus had no idea where Barty was getting these creatures and by that point, he was too afraid to ask. One night they were sent to a muggle village and Barty showed up with a ten-foot-tall troll in tow. It smelled so bad that Regulus almost threw up in his mask. When asked where he found the thing, Barty just laughed and started shooting stinging hexes at it to make it attack people. It was horrific, and Regulus spent the entire raid just trying to avoid the beast.

The troll he was faced with now was much the same as the one Barty used. It had the same dull, granite gray skin and disfigured lumpy body. It carried a huge wooden club, so large that it dragged on the ground behind the troll. Its head nearly grazed the vaulted ceiling.

"The key is in the lock," Harry whispered as the troll entered the girls' bathroom. "We can lock it in."

"Good idea," Ron said, already moving to twist the key.

"I thought we came over here to warn Hermione, not kill her," Regulus snapped. Harry and Ron looked at him in shock for a second before they jumped into action, following the troll into the bathroom. Hermione was cowering against the far wall and the troll was moving toward her quickly, or as quick as a troll could move, smashing the sinks off the wall as it went.

Regulus was not about to repeat what he had done with the giant dog, freezing up and being completely useless. He had spent weeks researching how to fight off dangerous animals and perhaps a troll didn't fall exactly into this category, but the same principles applied.

"Stupefy!" Regulus yelled the spell and summoned all the magic he could to attack the beast, but it barely affected it. He followed it up with another stunner and then the Conjunctivitis Curse. The troll seemed more annoyed than anything, but at least it was focused on Regulus rather than the other children in the room. He threw a few stinging hexes like he'd seen Barty do, but this only made the troll turn back to Hermione like Regulus was purposefully egging it on.

He felt desperation pull at his control, but he had spent years facing the dangers of his parents, the Dark Lord, and the Aurors near the end of his life, so he was more than equipped to use it to his advantage. He dropped his Occlumency walls just enough to flood himself with the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him daily, the fear and the pain, and he drove it into his next spell.

“CONFRINGO!” His magic burned down through his fingertips and he wondered how his wand managed not to catch on fire in the process, but the spell exploded out of him and hit the troll in the stomach.

Only a moment later, he wondered if he should have used a less messy spell than a blasting curse as all four of them were suddenly coated in troll innards. Regulus sneered in disgust, but the other three were frozen in shock, staring at Regulus with wide eyes. The door to the bathroom slammed open and McGonagall, Snape, and Quirrell rush inside.

“What on earth is going on?” McGonagall said furiously. “Why aren’t you in your dormitory?”

“Please, Professor McGonagall,” Hermione said, her voice faint and shocked. “They were looking for me.”

“Miss Granger!” McGonagall’s voice climbed up an octave as she yelled.

“I went looking for the troll because I—I thought I could deal with it on my own—you know because I’ve read all about them,” Hermione said, tripping over her words as she went.

Ron dropped his wand in shock while Harry’s mouth hung open. Regulus was also confused about why the girl would tell a lie to the teacher for them. She barely knew Regulus, they had hardly spoken to each other, and Ron and Harry were not exactly kind to the girl. There was no reason for her to protect them.

“If they hadn’t found me, I’d be dead by now. Regulus—he...” she gestured over to him helplessly. McGonagall looked stricken. It was clear that Hermione had no way of properly delineating what Regulus had done, so the reference to the carnage around them was the only way she could explain.

“I stopped him,” Regulus said. He crossed his arms and turned his nose up in a haughty gesture reminiscent of his past self, the gesture was slightly ruined by a piece of troll intestine plopping down off his shoulder onto the floor.

“How?” Snape asked, a curious glint in his eye that Regulus did not appreciate.

“With magic,” Regulus answered snidely.

“What spell?” Snape said angrily. The other teachers seemed just as interested in Regulus’s answer, but Regulus was very aware that an eleven-year-old should not have known the blasting curse, let alone been able to use it well enough to kill a troll. Regulus shrugged and looked away from the professors.

“Well, in that case,” McGonagall said when it became clear that Regulus was not going to elaborate, staring at them all, “Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?”

McGonagall ended up taking five points from the poor girl but awarded five points each to Regulus, Ron, and Harry for their actions. That bizarre night seemed to bond the four of them together, though Hermione was looking at him like he was keeping a very important secret, which he supposed that he was. He knew that eventually, she would confront him about the spell he'd used, and how he knew it, but for the time being, she just seemed happy to have a few friends.

November brought a cold chill and the knowledge that Snape had been injured while trying to get past the three-headed dog on Halloween night. Regulus wondered why a professor would need to get past the beast, though he thought that maybe he was trying to remove it for some reason. But then again, Regulus knew that Snape was a Death Eater, how he had gotten a job under Dumbledore was a mystery, but regardless he might be after the item hidden at Hogwarts for some nefarious purpose. He wondered if Snape knew that the Dark Lord was still alive.

He didn't appreciate the way that Snape's suspicious sneaking around sparked the interest of Harry, Ron, and Hermione though.

The first Quidditch game was more stressful than Regulus would have hoped. He was secretly looking forward to watching Harry fly, he knew that it would remind him of James, and though the memory still stabbed through him like a hot poker, he couldn't help reveling in the nostalgia. Instead, Regulus had to watch Harry be jerked around on a jinxed broom. Regulus had his wand out the whole time, ready to throw a spell to slow his fall if he lost his grip.

“It's Snape. Look,” Hermione said to Regulus and Ron. Regulus looked across the pitch to see Snape staring unblinkingly at Harry on his broom, muttering to himself. The fact that Snape would try to attack Harry so brazenly in the middle of a Quidditch match made Regulus reel back in surprise. Snape had always been careful, overly so in some ways, though he would share spells with other kids growing up, he usually held his plans and opinions close to the chest.

“What should we do?” Ron asked, his voice panicked.

“Leave it to me,” Hermione said. Regulus watched her rush down the stairs. He was too far away to hit Snape with any kind of spell, so he kept his wand aimed at Harry, prepared to catch him if he had to. It only took a few minutes before there was a huge commotion near the professors. Regulus missed it for the most part as he watched Harry clamber back up onto his broom before racing down toward the ground and catching the Snitch with his open mouth. It was the most ridiculous way to catch a Snitch and Regulus laughed loudly as he watched, thinking about how much James would have loved this moment.

Regulus followed them to Hagrid's after the game. Harry, Ron, and Hermione told Hagrid frantically about Snape jinxing the broom, and when he didn't believe them, Harry spilled the

beans about Snape heading to the third floor on Halloween night and being bitten by the three-headed dog.

Fluffy, they found out its name was. Fluffy the three-headed dog belonged to Hagrid and Dumbledore was letting him keep it in the castle. It wasn't there on accident, not that Regulus thought that was really the case, but it was still bizarre to hear it confirmed.

"I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the..."

"Yes?" Harry said eagerly.

"Now, don't ask me anymore. That's top secret, that is."

"But Snape's trying to steal it." Hagrid seemed surprised that they would think that—as if Snape was someone to be trusted and not a Death Eater. Hagrid was dismissive though, and he clearly didn't believe that Snape had hexed the broom either, despite the desperate pleas of the three children.

Snape hexing the broom didn't surprise Regulus though. Snape hated James more than anyone and after James and Lily began dating, Regulus would catch Snape watching them hatefully. If Regulus had been a nicer person, he might have felt bad for Snape at the time, but Regulus was not a nice person, so instead, he relished in someone else experiencing the same pain he felt watching James and Lily fall in love.

"You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guarding, that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel—"

"Aha!" Harry interrupted. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had no idea who Flamel was and Regulus was glad for it, because the moment he heard the name, he knew exactly what was hidden at Hogwarts. The Philosopher's Stone, an item that could give someone immortal life. And who did Regulus know that craved immortality above everything else?

This piece of information made Regulus more sure than ever that his plan to come to Hogwarts was a good one. It was clear that Hogwarts wasn't safe, especially not for Harry.

the forbidden forest.

Regulus thought about going home for Christmas. He felt slightly bad for Kreacher, stuck in Grimmauld all alone with only Regulus's mother's painting for comfort. Regulus felt like she had gone insane in her portrait. He wondered if she was even capable of leaving the frame to talk to any of the other portraits in the house, he had never seen her do so and hadn't asked Kreacher. If he was honest with himself, he didn't really want to ask Kreacher anything about his mother at all. Regulus and his mother had a very distant relationship in his childhood. Sirius was her son, Regulus was his father's. Of course, she became far more overbearing in the later years of his life once Sirius began to act out, especially when Sirius was eventually disowned. He didn't have many fond memories of the woman and he had no desire to spend any time with her now. He could only imagine what she had been saying to Kreacher all those years.

So Regulus did think about going home but only briefly and ultimately decided it would be best to stay at Hogwarts. Besides, who knew what trouble Harry could get into alone in the giant castle? He wondered why Harry wasn't willing or didn't want to go home for the holiday, but he kept himself from prying too much. He asked once or twice, but Harry was always quick to change the subject.

Draco tried taunting Harry for the fact that he was staying. He seemed to find it wildly entertaining though clearly no one else did. Harry actually seemed unbothered by the taunts which was highly unusual. It stood out enough that Regulus was sure Harry was purposefully hiding his feelings about the topic, burying all of them, including his reaction to Draco's taunts.

Regulus woke up Christmas morning warm in his dorm bed and for a moment he forgot where he was. The feeling of Christmas was in the air and Regulus let himself fantasize about his last happy holiday, the Christmas of his fifth year when James wrote him letters every other day. James had wanted to stay in the castle to spend time with him, but they both knew it would be too suspicious for Sirius. They spent the week before break sneaking around the castle avoiding James's friends and stealing food from the kitchens.

Regulus purposefully let go of the memory, it wouldn't help him to dwell on James today. He finally got out of bed when he heard Ron and Harry moving around, both of them waking slowly before remembering what day it was. Ron jumped up excitedly, but Harry moved much slower. He wondered about the difference in their behavior, but he didn't understand Christmas excitement well enough to make sense of it.

Harry's reaction made slightly more sense to him as Regulus had not expected to get presents for Christmas. They never exchanged gifts in his home growing up, so it hadn't occurred to him that he might receive something. He certainly hadn't purchased any for anyone else. So he was surprised when he discovered a small package at the foot of his bed. He unwrapped it slowly and discovered a hand-knitted blue sweater with a gold *R* stitched onto the front of it.

“Oh no,” Ron groaned. “She made you a Weasley sweater. Every year she makes us a sweater and mine’s always maroon,” Ron said to Regulus as he unwrapped his own sweater. Regulus understood his complaint when he saw it, the maroon color clashed painfully with Ron’s complexion, making him look like he’d recently contracted a deadly illness.

“Oh,” Regulus said uncomfortably. “Well, tell her I said thank you.” The sweater was extremely soft and comfortable, and Regulus surprised himself by putting it on immediately. His own mother had never given him a Christmas gift, it wasn’t something they did in their family; his mother didn’t consider it proper and his father was never home for Christmas so his opinion hardly mattered. His brother usually snuck a few sweets for them both when they were children, but after Sirius went to Hogwarts, Regulus spent almost every Christmas alone. He thought briefly about the one Christmas he spent imagining himself at James’s house again but wrenched his thoughts away quickly, it was too dangerous to think about such things in the light of day.

Regulus was extremely interested in Harry’s gifts. The flute from Hagrid and a sweater from Mrs. Weasley weren’t a surprise, but his father’s invisibility cloak was. Regulus had watched James take off the cloak enough times to recognize it on sight and seeing it in Harry’s small hands made Regulus’s heart clench painfully. Why didn’t Harry already have the cloak? He had forgotten about it until that moment, but it seemed odd that he wouldn’t be given it until he was eleven.

Regulus looked at the note attached to the package, but it gave no further indication of who it could be from. Why didn’t James have his invisibility cloak when he died? He wondered if it would have helped him on the night the Dark Lord came to kill them. Could James have escaped with it had he had it? Could Lily? The thoughts caused nausea to sweep through him and he worked to push them away. It was too painful to think of the ‘what ifs’ from that night.

Worst of all was the “gift” from Harry’s aunt and uncle. It was a small parcel with a note attached that said, “We received your message and enclosed your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia.” All that was in the parcel was a piece of muggle money. Regulus didn’t know much about muggle money, but he could tell that Harry was annoyed.

“That’s friendly,” Harry grumbled. Ron was fascinated by the money, but Regulus knew immediately that something was very wrong with Harry’s home life. He had noticed before that Harry was skinnier than he should be at his age, the smallest of the six Gryffindor boys, but Regulus thought perhaps he just wasn’t a big eater. However, he also noticed that Harry tended to eat like someone was about to steal the food right off of his plate. These two things combined painted an unfortunate image, plus the small non-gift from his family made Regulus very worried, though he wasn’t sure what to do about it.

Briefly, and with great pain, he wondered what James would want him to do.

The first night that Harry had the invisibility cloak, Regulus noticed him sneaking out of their dorm late at night, not exactly a surprise given who his father was. He told them he was searching the library’s restricted section for information on Nicolas Flamel, but Regulus

guessed that he was mostly out wandering the castle. It seemed harmless to Regulus, so he made no effort to stop him.

However, one morning he told them about a strange mirror he discovered while trying to run from Filch and Snape. He told them that he had seen his parents and while Ron was immediately fascinated with what Harry was saying, Regulus was watching closely as Harry picked around his food, a vacant look in his eyes. Harry woke Regulus and Ron later that night and dragged them both around the castle until he found the room with a mirror in it.

“See?” Harry whispered. He threw his cloak on the ground as they entered the room and approached the mirror as quickly as his tiny legs would let him.

“I can’t see anything,” Ron replied. He sounded irritable, it had taken far longer than expected for Harry to find the room again, and it was clear that Ron was tired and grumpy.

“Look! Look at them all...” Harry’s voice was laced with reverence. The vacant look in his eyes from earlier was gone, but it was replaced with a glazed look like he was sleepwalking.

“I can only see you,” Ron said, shaking his head slightly.

“Look in it properly, go on, stand where I am.” Regulus looked at the mirror curiously while Ron and Harry talked. It had some sort of writing on the top, but Regulus wasn’t sure what it said. It wasn’t in any language that he could recognize.

Ron exclaimed when he finally stood where Harry had been standing, telling them he saw himself holding the House cup and the Quidditch cup while wearing a Head Boy badge.

“Do you think this mirror shows the future?” Ron asked.

“How can it? All my family is dead... Regulus, you take a look,” Harry said, shoving Ron out of the way.

“Hey!” Ron protested as Regulus walked up to look in the mirror, ignoring Ron’s outburst.

Regulus watched as his eleven-year-old self vanished from the mirror and was replaced with an older version, his eighteen-year-old self. Except this wasn’t him exactly. He was wearing a short-sleeved muggle t-shirt, like the ones he always saw Sirius in, and his forearms were blank and unmarked. Standing beside him was James, smiling and wrapping his arms around Regulus's waist. The two of them grinned widely at each other and kissed softly, lovingly.

“Regulus? Are you okay?” He heard Harry say.

“Yes,” he said. His voice sounded rough and only then did he realize he was crying. He wiped at his eyes furiously, embarrassed that he had broken down so easily.

“What do you see?” Ron asked tentatively.

“It doesn’t matter,” Regulus said. “I don’t think we should be messing with this mirror.” Both of the boys looked unwilling to argue with him, it was clear that Harry was still anxious to look into it again and see his family, but Regulus's tears seemed to have unsettled him.

A sudden noise outside the room interrupted them, and they quickly ran back to their dorm to avoid being caught out of bed. They were lucky that no one caught them, even with the invisibility cloak, their footsteps were loud and echoey in the castle corridors. Regulus noticed Harry sneaking off the next night, but he didn't follow him, no matter how much he worried about the mirror's effect on the boy. He didn't know what that mirror was, but he wasn't interested in being taunted with what he could never have. He'd made his choice. Despite his insistence that he wouldn't waste his dwelling on the past, he still found himself ruminating on the 'if onlys.'

If only he hadn't taken the mark. If only he had run when Sirius did. If only he hadn't been sorted into Slytherin. If only he hadn't been a Black. The 'if onlys' seemed to run through his head on repeat, and he had more trouble than usual blocking them out after seeing what future he could have had. Regulus barely ate in the days after seeing the mirror and by the time school started back up, Regulus was shaking and disoriented from lack of food and sleep.

He heard Hermione chiding Harry for being out after hours and not using the cloak to research Flamel, but he was too disconnected to chime in. It didn't matter either way. He didn't want them looking to Flamel and he didn't want Harry going to the mirror, but what could he do? Steal the invisibility cloak from a child? No, he would never do that, no matter how much danger Harry could be in. That cloak belonged to Harry, it was likely one of the only pieces Harry had left of his father. It would feel like a betrayal to James to take it, and Regulus had betrayed James more than enough for one lifetime.

The beginning of term wasn't enough to bring him back; he was only shaken out of his funk when he found out that Snape would be refereeing the next Gryffindor Quidditch game.

Regulus knew that Snape hated Harry, but this seemed like an odd way to play out his vendetta. He wondered if Snape would do something to hurt Harry during the game, but it felt like it was far too public of a venue. Then again, if he was the one to jinx the broom the first time around, that was also far too public. He wondered why Snape wouldn't just go after Harry in private if that was his goal. The other children were positive that Snape would use the opportunity to hurt Harry, or worse, cause them to lose the game. Their words, not his.

The issue was moot though when Harry caught the snitch only a few minutes after the game began. His flying was impeccable as if he came out of the womb on a broom. Even James, as good of a Quidditch player as he was, couldn't fly like that without years of practice.

Disturbingly, Harry, Ron, and Hermione also discovered who Nicolas Flamel was shortly after the new year started. Regulus had underestimated them, he thought he at least had a few more months before they figured it. Though they figured out what was probably hidden at Hogwarts, Regulus didn't think it would necessarily put them in any more danger. He listened to them theorize about why Snape was trying to steal it, though the prospects of infinite wealth and immortality seemed like enough for them. All this meant to Regulus was that none of them knew that Snape had once served the Dark Lord. It was probably for the best, though Regulus himself didn't trust Snape, he didn't need a group of children planning to accuse a dangerous Death Eater of something at the wrong time.

The afternoon after the Quidditch game, Harry shared the details of a conversation he overheard between Snape and Quirrell where Snape threatened Quirrell before questioning him about how to get past Fluffy.

“So you mean the Stone’s only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?” Hermione said.

“It’ll be gone by next Tuesday,” Ron added.

Regulus agreed though it was clear that Quirrell had no idea how to get past Fluffy. Quirrell was a horrendous Defense teacher, so this didn’t surprise him. He spent many hours mulling over how he himself might get past a three-headed dog, but short of an extremely powerful sleeping draught, he wasn’t totally sure.

A creature that size would require a high-powered spell to kill it or even to knock it out, and it would most likely take more than one person to deal with it. Not to mention that Dumbledore would know immediately that someone had broken in and stolen the stone the moment he saw the dead animal. If someone were trying to be sneaky about it, they would have to knock Fluffy out for only a short enough time to get in and grab the stone.

Time picked up once the spring term began. Hermione started studying for finals ten weeks early and though Regulus didn’t need to study, he ended up joining her in the library most of the time, using the time to secretly research soul magic and dangerous animals. One afternoon, when Harry and Ron deigned to join them, they saw Hagrid in the library, an odd sight to be sure.

“Yer not still lookin’ for Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?” Hagrid asked. Way to bury the plot, Regulus thought. Hagrid was the absolute worst choice for hiding secrets, Regulus decided. Though he was a kind man, and Regulus was surprised by how much he liked him, he was very unimpressed with his ability to keep information to himself. Regulus would be annoyed if it wasn’t for how caring the half-giant was towards Harry, offering support and friendship that no other adult seemed to do.

“Oh, we found out who he is ages ago,” Ron said smugly.

“Hush,” Regulus hissed at him. Ron looked vaguely offended for a moment before it was replaced with the serious look that always crossed his face when Regulus told him to do something like he was a secret spy given an important mission. Regulus privately found the expression endearing. Something about a small child looking so responsible like he was mimicking an adult really tugged at his heartstrings.

“Yeh have no business lookin’ into that,” Hagrid scolded.

“We’re not,” Regulus promised with an innocent smile. “Don’t worry.” Hagrid gave him a side-eyed look, clearly not believing him. Hagrid left a few moments later after asking them to come and see him.

“What was he hiding behind his back?” Hermione asked. Regulus was curious as well, but he didn’t feel like this boded well. Ron went to check the section Hagrid had been in and came

back with a dismayed look on his face.

“Dragons,” he whispered importantly. “He was looking up stuff about dragons!”

“Oh no,” Regulus groaned. Harry chuckled and even Hermione looked mildly amused, though it was quickly replaced with her signature pinched, concerned look.

“Hagrid’s always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him,” Harry said.

“Well, let’s stay out of it,” Regulus said before Ron could respond. “If Hagrid is trying to illegally obtain and raise a dragon in his wooden hut, then we should be as far away as possible.” Hermione nodded, but Ron and Harry looked unconvinced.

Later that night, Hermione, Ron, and Harry left to visit Hagrid, planning to talk to him about the Philosopher’s Stone. “Be subtle about it,” Regulus instructed.

“You’re not coming with us?” Harry asked while he threw on his heavy school cloak. Regulus had noticed that he almost always wore his school uniform, even on weekends and evenings.

“No, thank you,” Regulus said primly. “I am more than happy to remain here.”

“Whatever,” Ron said amicably. “Let’s go before it gets too late.”

“And if he has a dragon —” Regulus yelled after them.

“We know,” Harry interrupted. “Stay out of it.” Regulus laughed at his exasperated tone.

Once they were gone, Regulus took a quick look through Harry’s trunk. He knew it was an invasion of privacy, but he was so curious about why Harry chose not to wear his own clothing. What he found was odd and disturbing. He owned only a few items of clothing, a few loose shirts that Regulus had seen Harry wear to bed in the warmer months, and two pairs of pants, both way too large for his small frame. He wondered if he was given anything besides underwear to wear to sleep in. The clothes were worn and old, plus they had a slight smell to them, like old sweat, that must have been permanently staining the fabric if even the house elves couldn’t get them out.

Regulus had spent the year accumulating more and more unpleasant facts about Harry’s home life, and this just compounded on the disturbing details. He felt rage sear through him, hot and painful, but when it faded all he felt was guilt. Yes, Regulus hadn’t been around when Harry was growing up, still drowned in the cave, but he felt a semblance of responsibility for the boy. He cared about him, and it was becoming clearer every day that he was one of the few adults who did.

He wasn’t sure what to do about that for the time being, though he knew he would have to tell someone else and, hopefully, encourage someone who had the power to help to do so, but for now, he decided to fix the problem in front of him. He worried that Harry would be embarrassed if Regulus bought all his clothes for him, and since Christmas had already passed, he decided to collect a fuller wardrobe, fit for a well-taken-care-of wizard child, and

give it to him for his birthday. He lounged on the bed after deciding this, making a list of everything he would need to purchase, and waited for the others to return.

Of course, it turned out that Hagrid had somehow obtained a dragon egg, supposedly winning it in a game of cards with a stranger, and one morning at breakfast, Harry received a note telling him the egg was hatching. Regulus trailed after them as they went down to Hagrid's hut to check it out after their lessons. He should have known that it would be a terrible idea.

"Hagrid," Hermione said uncertainly as the dragon burst out of its egg, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?" Regulus watched on nervously. He had never encountered a dragon in person, and it wasn't something he'd ever planned to do. When he was a child, Sirius used to tell him stories about dragon tamers and the exciting, adventurous lives they lived, always talking with clear hero worship, but all the stories did was make Regulus nervous. He remembered having nightmares for weeks about Sirius being attacked and eaten by a dragon. Though the dragon in front of him was as small as a puppy, he still felt a cold sweat break out on the back of his neck.

"Someone was lookin' through the gap in the curtains." Regulus heard Hagrid say when he finally started listening to the conversation again. Harry ran to the door and looked out.

"It was Malfoy!" Harry yelled. "Great! Malfoy saw the dragon. Of course, he did." Harry looked so forlorn that Regulus almost laughed out loud. He managed to keep it in though, holding back the laughter when he realized how bad it could be for them, Hagrid especially, if Draco told anyone.

Regulus could understand Harry's worry over the situation, but all Draco seemed to do was smirk at Harry about it, not much of a plan if you asked Regulus. Regardless, it presented the opportunity for them to convince Hagrid to get rid of the thing. Dragon breeding was highly illegal and Hagrid lived on the grounds of a school with children living in it. Needless to say, Regulus was more than happy to hear that Hagrid agreed to let Charlie, Ron's older brother, handle the dragon.

Charlie agreed to take the dragon but asked they get it to the Astronomy Tower at midnight in order for him and his friends to pick it up, which seemed ridiculous to Regulus. Why couldn't they just travel straight to Hagrid's hut instead of asking Hagrid to carry a rapidly growing dragon up to the top of a tower? Of course, it wasn't Hagrid who was going to do it, but Harry and Ron. This was about the time that Regulus put his foot down.

"Tell Charlie no," Regulus said. "There is barely any difference between flying from the Astronomy Tower to flying to Hagrid's hut, especially if it's at midnight on a Saturday."

"We can't tell him no," Ron said bewilderedly, like Regulus had just suggested spitting in the Minister of Magic's face.

"I'm sure he has a good reason for asking," Harry added pragmatically. "Besides, I don't mind. Anything to get rid of Norbert... and Malfoy." Regulus rolled his eyes. If Regulus had a Galleon for every time Harry brought up Draco in conversation, he would be a very rich man. Not that he wasn't already absurdly rich, but still.

“Okay, then make Hagrid carry him up there,” Regulus argued. Hagrid was the adult for Merlin’s sake, there was no reason a group of children should be handling this problem.

“He probably can’t go up there that easily, given how big he is,” Ron said.

“This is ridiculous. You two should not be in charge of this. You’re going to get caught,” Regulus argued. “You’re going to get expelled if they find you out of bed moving an illegal dragon through the castle.”

“I have the cloak, it shouldn’t be that difficult,” Harry said.

“Shouldn’t be that difficult? Are you crazy?” Regulus all but yelled.

“Relax Reg, it’s not a big deal. You don’t have to help,” Harry said. Regulus paused for a second at the nickname but decided to let it slide for the time being.

“Of course, I’m going to help. I’m not just going to leave you two on your own,” Regulus said. Harry and Ron shared a look of exasperation.

The night they moved Norbert ended up only being Harry and Regulus after Ron was bitten by the dragon and had to spend the night in the Hospital Wing. The cloak wasn’t quite big enough to fit three children and the dragon’s cage, so Hermione stayed behind. The plan was fraught from the beginning when Draco took the book that Ron had stored Charlie’s letter in, meaning Draco knew their exact plan for the night.

They stayed hidden throughout the castle easily with the help of the cloak and were treated to the sight of Draco getting detention when McGonagall found him roaming the halls looking for Harry. Why he didn’t just give the note to a teacher beforehand seemed ridiculous, but of course, Draco would want to personally witness Harry getting into trouble. Regulus noticed Harry smirking when they got to the top of the staircase but decided not to mention it. He didn’t think they had time for a full Draco rant in the middle of their task.

They almost got away with it all, watching Charlie’s friends swoop down on broomsticks and fly away with the dragon - which Regulus found insulting, he couldn’t even come himself - but they made the dumb mistake of forgetting the cloak at the top of the tower, and were caught on their way down by Filch. Regulus could have hit himself in the head. It was such a rookie mistake, but what was done was done.

Both them, plus Draco and Neville, who was out of bed for the express purpose of warning Harry, were given detention and they lost a total of 150 points for Gryffindor. Harry and Neville were both extremely sulky about this, but Regulus wasn’t exactly bothered. The thought of house points barely crossed his mind during his first go around at Hogwarts, and he cared even less now.

The detention they were given was to be served with Hagrid, which Regulus found ironic given he was the reason they got detention in the first place. When he found out they were going into the Forbidden Forest at night, he just about started screaming at Hagrid. He only barely managed to hold his tongue.

As he watched Neville and Draco head off with Fang, alone in the forest, Regulus wondered if perhaps Hagrid was trying to get them all killed. The run-in with the centaur named Ronan put Regulus even more on edge.

“Always the innocent are the first victims,” Ronan said when Hagrid mentioned something killing unicorns. “So it has been for ages past, so it is now.” Regulus shuddered when he heard the words. It felt like Ronan knew more than he was letting on, but then again, it wasn’t uncommon for centaurs to keep information to themselves.

“Hagrid! Look! Red sparks, the others are in trouble!” Regulus heard Harry yell shortly after Ronan left them, trotting deeper into the forest. Hagrid took off toward the sparks, leaving Harry and Regulus alone in the forest. Regulus pulled his wand and looked around warily.

The minutes seemed to drag by, but eventually, Hagrid found them again, Draco and Neville in tow.

“Right, we’re changin’ groups - Neville, you stay with me an’ Regulus, Harry, you go with Fang an’ this idiot,” Hagrid said, then leaned down to whisper something to Harry.

“Wait,” Regulus interrupted, “it’s fine, I’ll go with Draco. Harry, you stay with Neville and Hagrid.” Regulus did not feel comfortable being separated from Harry, but he felt like Harry would be safer with Hagrid by his side, even if Hagrid was the one to drag them out there. Regulus did not like the odds of both Draco and Harry coming back intact if they set off together in the forest.

“Fine,” Hagrid said. Harry smiled apologetically while Draco sent a furious glare at both of them.

Regulus and Draco set off into the forest with Fang and walked in complete silence for a solid few minutes before Draco started speaking.

“Are you actually a Black?” Draco asked, his tiny, high-pitched voice filled with disdain.

“Yes, of course,” Regulus said, giving Draco a sidelong look. Draco was watching him through narrowed eyes.

“Who are you even related to?” Draco asked though Regulus felt like that was a dumb way to phrase the question given he and Draco were also related. Still, he understood the point of what Draco was asking.

“Sirius Black,” Regulus answered. “He’s my father.” He still felt uncomfortable telling this lie. Every time he said his brother’s name, he had to swallow down the anger that threatened to overwhelm him. Pretending to be the son of that traitor was difficult, to say the least.

“Who’s your mom?” Draco said after a second. Regulus wondered how much he knew about Sirius — if Narcissa ever mentioned him.

“She’s from France, you wouldn’t know her.” Regulus was used to this excuse. He wondered if anyone would ever grow suspicious of why they would never meet the imaginary woman.

“Is she a pureblood?” Draco asked with grave importance. Regulus wasn’t exactly surprised by the questions, Lucius and Narcissa no doubt instilling the importance of blood purity into Draco at a very young age, but he was surprised by how frank the question was. Clearly, Draco lacked the delicacy of conversation that Narcissa had perfected by his age.

“Yes,” Regulus answered confidently like he wasn’t making the entire thing up. He figured it was easier to go with the lie that she was a pureblood, plus he still couldn’t shake the feeling of shame that came along with possibly pretending to be a half-blood, though that feeling of shame was always paired with an unwavering feeling of guilt to go along with it.

“I don’t believe you,” Draco said snootily. Regulus wondered if he needed to be worried about Draco. Right now he was more than focused on Harry, but if he chose to look too closely into Regulus’s backstory, he might be able to figure out the lie, especially with the help of Narcissa.

“I don’t care,” Regulus replied, though he cared very much. Draco figuring out his secret could be very bad for him. “You better be quiet, otherwise all that noise you’re making might attract a werewolf.” Regulus saw Draco looking away nervously, even though it wasn’t a full moon and there were many more dangerous things in the forest beyond werewolves.

“What is that?” Draco said a few minutes later. Regulus followed where he was pointing and saw the unicorn’s blood pooling on the forest floor, the silvery glint shining like liquified metal.

Draco and Regulus watched in horror as a cloaked figure walked out of the shadows and approached the dead unicorn the blood was dripping from. Its knees bent the wrong way, giving it an uncanny effect that made Regulus feel vaguely ill. When the figure reached the unicorn and lowered its head to drink its blood, Draco let out a loud scream and ran with Fang following close behind.

Regulus whipped his wand out and watched as the figure turned to look at him. It staggered to its feet and prowled towards him. Regulus had no idea what or who would be out in the forest drinking unicorn’s blood, but he knew that there was only one reason that someone might indulge in the cursed liquid, immortality. Even with the grave cost, there were still those desperate enough to drink the substance if it meant staying alive.

The figure was wraithlike and Regulus could only think of one person who might appear as such. *He’s out here in the forest, drinking unicorn’s blood.* His thoughts were spinning rapidly in his head. *He’s in the same forest as Harry.*

He pointed his wand at the approaching figure and tried to summon every modicum of hatred he felt for the Dark Lord. *You have to mean it,* he heard Bellatrix’s voice echo in his ear. She had tried to teach him how to cast the Killing Curse when he was thirteen, far too young to be safely using dark magic, and again when he was first marked as a Death Eater, but he never could make the spell work. He remembered trying to cast it at a muggle woman during a raid and watching in surprise as it seemed to hit her and dissolve. He vowed not to make the same mistake again now.

A Killing Curse wouldn't truly kill the Dark Lord, not with the locket tucked away in Grimmauld Place still intact, but it would make Harry that much safer, possibly at least destroying the wraith-like body in front of him.

"Avada —" he began but was cut off by the loud sound of hooves behind him. The cloaked figure shuffled back before taking off into the forest just as a centaur galloped into the clearing.

"Are you all right?" the centaur asked in a silky, deep voice.

"Yes," Regulus said, half relieved and half disappointed, the hatred he felt was still stuck inside him, now with nowhere to go.

"You had better get back to Hagrid. The forest is not safe at this time. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way," the centaur said as he lowered himself to allow Regulus to climb on. Regulus did not want to ride on the back of a centaur, but he knew it would be rude to refuse. What would Mother think? The unwelcome thought cropped up and Regulus batted it away quickly. "My name is Firenze."

"Regulus," he offered in response.

"Yes, you are," Firenze responded mysteriously. Firenze was interrupted by Ronan and Bane and Regulus tuned out their inane conversation. Instead, he thought about the Dark Lord, roaming freely out in the forest. How easily Harry could have been the one to come into contact with him tonight. After arguing with them, Firenze eventually left Ronan and Bane, and he and Regulus traveled in silence until they found the others.

"Regulus! Reg, are you all right?" Harry was running toward them down the path, Hagrid trailing along behind him.

"I'm fine," Regulus said, climbing off Firenze's back. Harry was very distraught once Regulus walked over to him. He grabbed Regulus's arms tightly and seemed to check him over for injuries. "I'm all right," Regulus said, helplessly chuckling at Harry's worry.

Ron and Hermione were asleep in the common room when they got back and Regulus gave them an abridged version of what happened in the forest. Draco had told Harry and the others about the cloaked figure, but he clearly didn't know who it was, so Regulus left that part out as well. There was no reason to worry the children with the prospect of the Dark Lord wandering around the Forbidden Forest right outside of Hogwarts.

Ron and Hermione seemed very interested in who it was under the cloak, but Harry was mostly distracted by his own self-condemnation.

"You didn't want to help in the first place and I talked you into it!" Harry ranted. "You could have died. I almost got you killed."

"You didn't almost get me killed," Regulus replied, rolling his eyes at the young boy's dramatics. "I agreed to help you willingly, and it was also partially my fault that we left the

cloak in the Astronomy Tower.” Harry did not look mollified by this, but he didn't argue back.

“I can’t believe Draco just ran away and left you,” Ron said.

“No,” Regulus disagreed. “Draco did the right thing. What was he going to do? Fight off someone that killed a unicorn?” Ron looked surprised by what Regulus said, but Hermione nodded in agreement. Harry merely looked unsure. “If any of you come across something like that, you need to run away too.”

Regulus could tell immediately that Harry didn’t agree with him. His face was doing something strange as he listened like he was more determined than ever that he should stay and fight this hypothetical enemy. Regulus did not feel good about what that look might mean for the future.

the stone.

Taking first-year exams for the second time around felt almost like cheating. He could have completed them in his sleep. He felt slightly ridiculous trying to purposefully do worse on them than he could have, but he knew it would only draw unneeded attention to him if he was first in his class. The year had flown by far faster than he expected, he could barely believe that the term was almost over. He hadn't made any progress on his Horcrux problem nor had he figured out how to get past Fluffy. He'd never felt more useless in his life and taking sham exams didn't help.

After exams, he followed Harry, Ron, and Hermione out onto the grounds to relax.

Harry was complaining about pain in his cursed scar, rubbing his hand across his forehead as he winced. Regulus found it odd that a scar that old would still hurt him, but cursed scars had a reputation for having a mind of their own. Nonetheless, he thought it was concerning. Hermione was in the middle of telling Harry to go see Madam Pomfrey when he suddenly leaped to his feet.

“What’s wrong?” Regulus asked, startled.

“I’ve just thought of something. We’ve got to go and see Hagrid, now.” He took off running immediately and the rest of them had no choice but to get up and follow. Harry rambled on about the dragon egg Hagrid had won as he ran, but Regulus was having a hard time following his train of thought.

“And did he seem interested in Fluffy?” Harry asked while peppering Hagrid with questions about the person who gave him the egg. *Oh no*, Regulus thought. Of course, there were only two people who knew how to get passed the monstrous dog: Hagrid and Dumbledore. It wasn’t Quirrell that they needed to worry about, no it was Hagrid all along.

“We’ve got to go to Dumbledore,” Harry said as they sprinted back up to the castle. “Where’s Dumbledore’s office?”

“This way,” Regulus said, guiding them toward the Headmaster’s Tower entrance. He’d never actually been inside the office, but he at least knew where it was.

“What are you three doing inside?” McGonagall interrupted them as they sped down one of the hallways.

“We need to speak with Dumbledore,” Regulus said solemnly.

“Professor Dumbledore,” she corrected, then seemed to realize what he had said. “Why?”

“It’s sort of a secret,” Harry said, looking extremely guilty. Regulus huffed and rolled his eyes.

“Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago,” she responded coldly. “He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once.”

“When will he be back?” Regulus said, interrupting whatever Harry was about to say.

“I’m not sure how that is any of your business,” she said. “What is it you need to discuss with him?”

“It’s about the -” Harry started, but Regulus interrupted him.

“It can wait, we will talk to him when he gets back.” Harry, Ron, and Hermione all looked incredulously at him and McGonagall looked irritated. “Thank you, Professor,” he added and grabbed Harry to drag him away, Ron and Hermione following just a bit slower.

“What was that? We have to tell her about the stone!” Harry said, ripping his arm away once the four of them were out of sight.

“We can’t just bring it up to her, she’s going to wonder how we know about it,” Regulus explained.

“Who cares! It could be in danger. Snape could have already stolen it,” Ron nearly yelled.

“Exactly,” Regulus responded. “Hagrid was given that egg months ago, the stone could already be gone, we have no way of knowing.” Regulus wondered if there would be any way to tell if the stone was already being used by the Dark Lord. He almost wished he still had the Mark so he could know if the Dark Lord was calling his followers. “However, if it’s still there -”

“Then we need to get it first,” Harry said, that determined look back on his little face.

“You’re not suggesting that we try to get into the trap door,” Hermione said, scandalized. It was the first thing she had said in a while, still looking bewildered by the turn of events.

“If he hasn’t stolen it yet, then it’s unlikely he will steal it right now. We should wait until Dumbledore gets back,” Regulus argued, but he could already tell that it was a losing battle. Once the three Gryffindors set their mind to something, it was almost impossible to sway them. Regulus wished that he had spent more time trying to figure out how to get passed the three-headed dog, he felt like he had done nothing but waste time this year.

“I can’t let him get that stone,” Harry said seriously.

“It’s not your responsibility,” Regulus said as harshly as he could manage. Why Harry felt the need to stop Snape, like it was his job alone, Regulus would never know. He never met a kid who was so willing to shoulder responsibility.

“If he comes back, then he’s going to try and kill me,” Harry added.

“If who comes back?” Regulus asked nonplussed.

“Voldemort!” Harry yelled. Regulus flinched violently at the name.

“What? How?” Regulus asked, trying to organize his thoughts enough to ask a full question. Harry, along with Ron and Hermione, suddenly looked very guilty. He wondered how long they had been discussing this topic. There was no way they should know about the Dark Lord in the forest. “Explain,” Regulus said firmly.

“Well,” Harry started slowly, “Hagrid told me that he thought he was still alive, ‘too weak to go on,’ he said. And with the thing you saw in the forest—”

“Drinking unicorn blood is considered incredibly evil,” Hermione interrupted, taking over the explanation. “It’s supposed to keep a person alive even if they’re on the brink of death. I looked it up.”

“So, we figured, well the person killing unicorns—” Harry continued.

“It had to be You-Know-Who,” Ron said. “That’s the only explanation that fits.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Regulus demanded. They all shared a glance, but Harry was the one to answer, taking the lead as he always did.

“Because you were the one to see him, I didn’t want you to worry. I mean, you literally came face to face with him in the forest,” Harry explained. Regulus rolled his eyes so hard that it hurt.

“You should have told me, okay? I could have helped you, or explained what I saw.”

“Wait,” Hermione said, “you knew who it was?” Harry’s guilty look was replaced with one of accusation.

“I had my theories. Firenze, the centaur, may have mentioned something,” Regulus said vaguely. “But it’s not your responsibility to worry about that monster. Hogwarts is supposed to be safe.” Harry still looked extremely put out but seemed to shake off the feeling, his focus narrowing back to their most pressing topic.

“Well, we still need to get the stone before he does. If he is capable of surviving without unicorn blood, then he’s going to try and kill me.” Regulus couldn’t argue with that, given that it was the exact reason for him attending Hogwarts for a second time around, but he also did not like the fact that Harry was so aware of the danger he was in. He felt like it was too much for a child to bear.

Regulus grunted in frustration. “Fine! Then I will go down and get the stone.” All three of their mouths dropped open. “You guys should go back up to the common room and I’ll meet you there.” Now that he knew how to get passed Fluffy, he figured it would be easier to steal the stone. He at least felt like he had a fighting chance.

“You’re not going down there alone!” Hermione said, her voice taking on a shrill quality that reminded him of McGonagall.

“Yes, I am,” Regulus replied matter-of-factly.

“Why you and not me? I’m the one Voldemort’s after,” Harry said fiercely. Regulus flinched again but tried his best to stop himself. He wished Harry would stop throwing that name around.

“Because I’m more experienced,” Regulus said, though his voice sounded slightly shakier. Ron looked mollified like this statement made all the sense in the world, which perhaps it did after Regulus had killed the troll. Harry only rolled his eyes like Regulus was throwing a fit. Hermione, however, looked extremely suspicious, like something she was already unsure of had just been revealed.

“I’m going with you,” Harry said. Regulus opened his mouth to argue but was interrupted.

“I am too,” Hermione said.

“Me too,” Ron added.

“No, we can’t all go,” Regulus said. “None of you should go,” he corrected. “There is no reason for us all to be in danger. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“It’s better if we’re together, what if you have to fight something?” Hermione argued.

“Then I’ll fight it,” Regulus responded. “I killed that troll just fine.”

“Just give it up already, Regulus,” Ron said, shrugging.

“I will not give it up already, this is serious,” Regulus said exasperatedly.

“Exactly,” Harry agreed. “So there is no way you’re getting rid of us.” Regulus threw his hands up in the air helplessly. Harry nodded like this had all been settled.

“Right, so we will go after curfew, that way there will be fewer professors out,” Harry said.

“Fine,” Regulus said and followed them up to the common room, already making an alternate plan for how to get around them. He figured he could knock them out early, he knew a semi-gentle sleeping spell that his father would use of him and Sirius when they were children. It wasn’t exactly ethical, but at least it would keep them out of danger. However, the moment he was inside the common room, he felt jittery and restless. They all settled on the couches in front of the fire, but after a few minutes, Regulus jumped up. “I’m going for a walk.”

He was up and out the door before any of them could respond. He just needed to walk off some of his energy, get a minute to clear his head and process the fact that Harry knew about the Dark Lord and his desire to hurt Harry. He wasn’t even sure what his plan was until he found himself in the third-floor corridor.

He didn't have an instrument to play music, but he thought he remembered a spell that would emulate a few notes of the piano. *Melumcantis*, he remembered. He thought about one of his friends from school, Pandora, who would often use the spell when she was studying in various places around the castle. He practiced a few times before he opened the door. It wasn't perfect, but Regulus thought it would work well enough.

There was no time like the present, he thought. He didn't want to wait till the evening, he felt like he needed to go after the stone now. He opened the door and immediately cast the spell.

"*Melumcantus*," he whispered. He heard the quiet piano carry out of the tip of his wand and it instantly helped him relax. He stayed just barely in the doorway, keeping the door cracked open so he could slam it shut if the dog lunged at him. He thought the spell was working okay until he heard a voice yell behind him.

"Hey!" it said, and Regulus slammed the door shut on instinct, spinning around to see Harry, Ron, and Hermione running down the corridor toward him. Regulus knew it was a bad plan to go ahead right away, but he figured he at least had an hour or so before they found him, not following him immediately. In retrospect, he had been incredibly dumb. He somehow still wasn't used to being surrounded by Gryffindors, especially ones who actually paid attention to him. His Slytherin friends, if he could even really call them that, during his first life, couldn't have cared less what Regulus was up to.

"What do you think you're doing?" Hermione said accusingly.

"Nothing," Regulus said. *I swear I used to be a much better liar than this*, he thought.

Harry didn't say anything, but Regulus could tell he was mad. He shoved Regulus to the side and pulled something out of his cloak pocket. It took a few seconds for Regulus to realize that it was the flute Hagrid had given Harry for Christmas.

Harry opened the door, slamming it open fully without caution, and immediately started playing the flute. Perhaps playing was too generous a term because it sounded horrendous, but Fluffy seemed to enjoy it because it only took a few moments before the dog was laying down its three giant heads and closing its eyes. Regulus ignored them all and walked forward to shove the dog's paw out of the way and open the trap door.

It was pitch black and Regulus wanted nothing less than to slam it shut and leave the room, just abandon the plan and let the Dark Lord steal the stupid stone, but when he looked up at the other three kids in the room with him, he knew he couldn't run. They would surely go on without him and he could never let them face whatever was down the trapdoor alone.

"I think it would be better if you just let me go alone," Regulus tried again. "Then you could go get help if I don't make it back," he added. Harry handed the flute to Ron who started playing it right away.

"We're coming with you. Hermione is right, it's better if we're together," Harry said, his voice calm and collected.

It was strange at that moment because, for so much of the year, Regulus had looked at Harry and thought of James. Harry looked so much like him, the same hair, the same smile, the jokes and troublemaking, the fierce way he watched Draco every time the little blonde boy entered a room, but Regulus didn't see James so much anymore. He never knew Lily, but he wondered if this level-headed stoic determination came from her. Or perhaps it was just Harry, a person of his own making.

“Okay,” Regulus conceded and before he could think any further, he threw his legs over the side and let himself fall through the trap door.

The protections for the stone were extremely odd. The Devil’s Snare was dangerous no doubt, but easily avoidable if you knew anything about Herbology. Regulus cast a *lumos maxima* almost by second nature, freeing the others from the plant. Catching the key required flying skills, but not even particularly good ones as even Hermione could have done it, though perhaps not as quickly as Harry managed to. The chessboard unsettled Regulus more than he’d like to admit. Why would the protection for an extremely powerful stone include a high-stakes game of chess?

The chess game was also when things started to go awry. Regulus had always been okay at chess, passable, but not terribly good at it. Harry was much the same it turned out and Hermione was absolutely terrible, so Ron took charge and played for them. It seemed to go fine until Ron had to sacrifice his own piece and ended up knocked out on the side of the room. Regulus cast a quick diagnostic spell on him, not even bothering to temper his skill level in front of the other two children, and determined that he was mostly fine, only suffering from a small concussion.

It was all very dramatic, but Regulus was more worried about what came next. Hermione, rather reluctantly, stayed behind with Ron and started heading back to get him to Madam Pomfrey while Harry and Regulus went on.

The next room was a giant troll, like the one Regulus killed on Halloween. Regulus knew something was very wrong then because he seemed to take care of it relatively easily on Halloween, so why would they keep something that an eleven-year-old could defeat as part of the elaborate protections? Regulus didn’t think he had it in him to kill another troll, and he was not interested in being covered in entrails again, so they had to improvise. They ended up using a combination of stinging hexes, stunning spells, and the troll’s own club to knock the thing unconscious. It was made easier by the fact that the troll was moving slowly and lethargically like it had been down there for a long time without food.

The next room was a potions riddle. It required no actual knowledge of potions, only the ability to think through a word problem. Regulus found this particularly bizarre. They knew that Snape was one of the professors protecting the stone so it wasn’t a surprise that he would make a potion-related protection, but why not make it into something only a potion’s master would know how to get through? Regulus made quick work of the potion riddle, but there was only enough to get one of them through to the next room.

“I’ll go,” Harry said grimly, but Regulus only rolled his eyes.

“No, you won’t,” Regulus said. “I’m better equipped to deal with anything beyond that door than you are.” Harry looked like he was about to argue, but seemed to realize that there wasn’t anything he could say that would convince Regulus to let him through the door. “Besides, I’m the one who figured out the riddle so it should be me.”

“Fine,” Harry said. “I’ll wait here until you come back.”

“You should head back and find Hermione,” Regulus suggested. “We don't know what's behind that door, so it's safer if you leave.”

“Exactly, we don't know, so I'm going to wait here and if you don't come back then I'll go get help.” Harry crossed his arms and Regulus thought that he looked very grown up for an eleven-year-old, more mature than Regulus ever felt at that age. It was unnerving in a way that he couldn't express. It almost made Regulus feel regretful like Harry was being robbed of an easy, carefree childhood.

“Okay,” Regulus agreed. “I'll be back.” He drank the smallest bottle of potion and proceeded through the black flames. It felt like walking through ice and Regulus wondered for a moment if he had made a mistake in deciphering the riddle, but then he was through and in the next chamber.

It was a wide open space with stone pillars along the oval walls. In the center of the dimly lit room was the mirror Harry showed him during Christmas break. Regulus was not looking forward to seeing his older self and James again, the last time had nearly broken him, but he knew he needed to get the stone.

He stepped forward to look in the mirror properly and was surprised when all he saw was his eleven-year-old self looking back at him. All he could think about was finding the stupid stone so that the Dark Lord couldn't get his hands on it. Maybe he would even destroy it if he could manage such a thing, though he still hadn't figured out how to destroy the other powerful magical object in his care. But if it would prevent the Dark Lord from using it, he would figure out a way.

He looked around the details of the mirror, inspecting the carvings above it, but couldn't make sense of this puzzle. Every other trial had been easily understood, but this one stumped him. He looked back at himself in the mirror and jolted when he noticed the smirk curved across his face. It was uncanny to see himself with a look that he had so often worn in his past life. His mirror self had his hands in his pockets, but when he noticed the real Regulus watching, he pulled out one hand and lifted it to his face to inspect it. It was only then that Regulus realized that his mirror self was holding something. His mirror self looked back at Regulus before winking and putting the object in his robe's inner pocket.

“What?” Regulus said aloud. He brushed his hands along his robe and felt something that wasn't there before. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the object, a small red crystal. The stone. “How?” Regulus asked, but of course, there was no answer.

He hadn't done anything yet and he couldn't figure out what had triggered the mirror to give him the stone. The realization caused him to shiver slightly. It was too easy. Something had to be wrong. Why would this be hidden so poorly? All anyone would need to do is come in and look in the mirror. The trials were so easy that any moderately skilled wizard could have gotten through them.

He shook off the thoughts. He would have to figure out later why it was so easy. For now, Harry was still waiting in the potion room for Regulus to return and Regulus was not keen on leaving him there alone for too long. He rushed back out of the chamber and through the black flames to find Harry leaning against the wall.

“Did you get it?” Harry said excitedly. Regulus reached into his pocket and drew the stone out to show the boy. “Woah, what did you have to do?”

“It was the mirror,” Regulus told him. “The one you showed me during Christmas break.”

“The Mirror of Erised,” Harry said. Regulus looked at him questioningly. “It shows you your heart’s desire or something, that’s what Dumbledore told me.”

“Oh,” Regulus said, thinking of his own vision in the mirror. “Do you know how he could have hidden the stone in it? I didn’t do anything except look in the mirror.” Harry shrugged and shook his head.

“No idea,” Harry replied.

“Well, let’s not worry about it for now. We should get out of here before anyone else comes.” Harry agreed easily and the two of them drank from the rounded bottle that would get them back through the flames and started heading back toward the entrance.

Regulus should have known that the other shoe was about to drop. Things had been far too easy, despite Ron’s injury, and there was no way they were making it back through the chambers unscathed. It reminded him of the cave when he first stood staring at the potion before he ended up surrounded by inferi. They were making their way back across the chessboard when the door on the opposite end of the room opened.

The first thought Regulus had was that the troll made sense now. Who had alerted them on Halloween night that there was a troll in the dungeon? It should have been obvious in retrospect. Of course, this realization was lost on Harry.

“He’s come to get the stone for Snape,” Harry whispered.

“No, I don’t think that’s right,” Regulus said, drawing his wand.

“You two,” Quirrell said, shocked. “What are you doing down here?”

“Could ask you the same question,” Regulus said, taking a step toward the stuttering teacher, although that stutter now seemed to be mysteriously missing.

“Is Snape with you?” Harry demanded, stepping up beside Regulus.

“Severus?” Quirrell laughed. “Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn’t he?”

“It was you this whole time,” Regulus interrupted. “Snape was trying to stop you, wasn’t he?”

“What?” Harry said, whipping his head around to look at Regulus. “But Snape tried to kill me!”

“No, no, no,” Quirrell said, speaking to Harry and giving Regulus an appraising look. “I tried to kill you.” Quirrell explained how he had been the one to jinx Harry’s broom, but Regulus had stopped listening. He could feel a chill on his skin, a cold sweat breaking out on his

forehead. There was something else in the room with them, and he needed to get Harry out as soon as possible.

“Snape was trying to *save* me?” Harry asked. That at least explained partially why Snape, the Death Eater, was teaching at Hogwarts. He must have had some deal with Dumbledore, especially if he was trying to save Harry despite his obvious dislike of the boy.

Regulus thought that perhaps he could sneak in a spell while Quirrell was talking, but he figured he only had one chance to catch him unaware. After that, he would lose the element of surprise and now that he knew Quirrell was faking his stuttering, fearful behavior, Regulus had no gauge for how the professor would handle a fight.

“*You* let the troll in?” Harry asked incredulously. Regulus focused all of his energy on his magic. He only had one shot and he needed to make sure it landed. He couldn’t risk Harry being hurt. Regulus had never been particularly adept at wordless magic, but he didn’t want to give Quirrell a heads up, so he focused on the same spell he used on the troll, a vicious blasting curse, and shot it off.

Regulus should have realized that Quirrell was watching him far too easily for it to work. He blocked the spell and sent it bounding off where it hit one of the chess pieces, shattering that piece into several shards.

“Foolish boy,” Quirrell said, but Regulus barely listened. He stepped in front of Harry, blocking him with his body, and fired again, much weaker but still quickly and wordlessly. Quirrell blocked his spell again, before shooting off one of his own. Regulus just barely had time to throw up a *Protego* before Quirrell was aiming another hex at him.

“Harry, run!” Regulus said, now just holding his shield rather than trying to fight back.

“No, I’m not leaving you,” Harry said fiercely.

“Let me speak to them,” a raspy voice spoke, causing a painful shudder to ripple through Regulus’s body. Quirrell stopped fighting, but Regulus still kept his shield in place, though he was too shocked to continue their duel.

“Master, you are not strong enough!” Quirrell said fearfully. *No*, Regulus thought. He grabbed Harry by the arm and pulled him fully behind Regulus since Harry had stepped out to face Quirrell once again.

“We need to get out of here,” Regulus said quietly. Harry grabbed onto the back of his cloak tightly.

“I have strength enough... for this...” the voice spoke. Regulus felt like he was going to be sick. Quirrell unwrapped the turban from his head deftly and turned his back on them. On the back of his head, was a face, a horribly mutilated face with a long stretched mouth, red eyes, and slits for a nose.

“Harry Potter,” the face whispered. Regulus felt the hand on the back of his cloak twist in fear. “And Regulus Black... another one.” Regulus raised his wand a little higher, but his

hand was shaking too much for it to be intimidating.

“See what I have become? Mere shadow and vapor —” the face said.

“You’re...” Regulus said, interrupting the face, his voice quivering slightly. Regulus swallowed quickly and tried to make his voice sound more firm so it wouldn’t shake. “You’re the Dark Lord.”

“You look so much like him,” the Dark Lord said, looking directly into Regulus's eyes, “Your name's sake. I did wonder what became of him.” Regulus met the red eyes head-on, though he wanted desperately to look away, to look at the floor in front of him like he always did when he met the Dark Lord in the past. Although this version of the Dark Lord wasn’t like the one Regulus had known. Though he never looked quite human and the red eyes made an appearance often, he still looked alive, but this thing on the back of Quirrell’s head looked like a monster out of a storybook. Horrific and twisted in a way that shouldn’t even be possible.

Regulus felt frozen to the spot, trapped with the monster he had betrayed. The monster that was after Harry, the one who had killed Harry’s parents, had killed James. Regulus didn’t fully understand how he could even be alive enough to attach himself to Quirrell, but that hardly mattered when he was face to face with him.

“He was quite the cowardly thing, the Regulus Black I knew,” the Dark Lord continued. “He would have never dared to draw his wand against me, too afraid of what might be done to him.” There was a cruel mirth in his voice now and Regulus couldn’t help but bristle at the sound of it. “Although there was talk,” he said, “whispers that he was too afraid to truly join us.”

“You don’t know anything,” Regulus spat. He hadn’t meant to speak, but the words just spilled out of him.

“Don’t I?” It was then that Regulus felt a slight pressure on his mind and he slammed his Occlumency walls shut as fast as possible, though the fear was now permeating throughout his body. *How much had he seen?* Regulus wondered. The Dark Lord hummed curiously. “Now... why don’t you give me that stone in your pocket?”

Regulus took a step backward and Harry stepped with him, watching over Regulus's shoulder, his whole body shaking slightly. Regulus had almost forgotten that Harry was there with how silent he was being. Regulus didn’t blame him. Though having the Dark Lord focus on him was terrifying, he preferred it to the alternative of Harry being targeted. The only thing Regulus could think of now was getting Harry out safely. He wanted to keep the stone safe, but if it was between that and Harry surviving, then he would choose Harry every time. Regulus pointed his wand at the Dark Lord, preparing to fight.

“Don’t be a fool,” the Dark Lord snarled, his face morphing with rage. “Better to save your own life and join me. Or you’ll meet the same end as the last Regulus, begging me for mercy.” This was surprisingly a relief to hear. It meant that the Dark Lord hadn’t seen enough to know how Regulus truly died.

“NEVER!” Regulus shouted, firing off a spell before he grabbed Harry by the arm and started pulling him across the room, trying to get past the Dark Lord and Quirrell.

“Seize him!” The Dark Lord screamed and Quirrell whirled around and grabbed Harry by the wrist. Harry screamed in pain, much more pain than he should have given where Quirrell was grabbing him. One of his small hands shot up and touched the scar on his forehead, his face curled in anguish. Regulus prepared to hit Quirrell with a spell when Quirrell suddenly let go of Harry and stumbled back.

“Master, I cannot hold him — my hands — my hands!” Regulus pulled Harry again, though Harry was moving noticeably slower, still clearly feeling residual pain in his scar.

They were almost to the door when the Dark Lord screamed, “Then kill them, fool, and be done!”

Quirrell raised his wand and Regulus did as well, but Harry was faster. He wrenched his arm free from Regulus's grasp, running over and grabbing Quirrell's face. Quirrell screamed loudly. His face was blistering as his hand had been. Regulus watched in horror as Harry grabbed onto Quirrell's arm and held on as tight as he could, Quirrell screaming and trying to throw him off the entire time.

The Dark Lord was screaming as well, but Quirrell's body was quickly disintegrating. Regulus could only watch in shock, but finally shook himself when he noticed that Harry was quickly losing consciousness. Regulus ran forward just in time to catch the collapsing boy before he fell to the ground. The door behind them was wrenched open and Quirrell was torn away from them. Regulus looked up to see Dumbledore pointing his wand at the dying professor, but there was nothing he could do as Quirrell lost his corporeal form and crumbled to the floor.

Regulus held Harry tightly and stared at the pile of ash that was once Quirrell. The Dark Lord was gone as well, though perhaps still here in a non-visible sense. Dumbledore looked at the two of them, his face worried and serious in a way Regulus had never seen it. There was no sparkling glint in his eye.

“We must get Harry to the Hospital Wing,” Dumbledore said and Regulus felt his body relax for the first time all day.

the steal.

“Is Harry going to be okay?” Regulus asked. Dumbledore had hurried them to the Hospital Wing once he found them, but neither had spoken. Harry was lying on one of the beds, more still than Regulus had ever seen him. Ron was in another bed, also asleep, but Hermione was nowhere to be seen, most likely already dismissed by Madam Pomfrey.

Regulus watched the gentle rise and fall of Harry’s chest closely, calming himself by remembering that he was at least still alive. His plan to protect the boy had already gone so awry, and he felt more overwhelmed with his own failure than he ever had.

“He will wake,” Dumbledore answered gently. “But his body, and magic, are exhausted. It is best that we leave him to rest. And I believe we have much to discuss.” Regulus did not like the sound of that, but he trailed after Dumbledore as he led them to the Headmaster’s office. The moment they entered the large, circular room, Regulus reached into his pocket and placed the stone on the Headmaster’s desk, all thoughts of possibly destroying the stone forgotten in the face of Dumbledore’s timely return.

“Ah, so you managed to get past the Mirror,” Dumbledore said mildly.

“Why was the stone here?” Regulus demanded, not interested in listening to the Headmaster’s inane questions. “Why hide it at the school? It was barely protected.” Dumbledore looked at Regulus with a curious glint in his eye.

“You are an unusual student, Mr. Black,” he said. Regulus felt his hackles raise.

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked. Dumbledore looked at him piercingly for a moment before leaning forward, steepling his fingers carefully in front of his face.

“Tell me, are you familiar with the Book of Admittance?” Dumbledore asked.

“No,” Regulus lied. Of course, he knew what the Book of Admittance was. Every pureblood probably knew of the Book of Admittance. It was mentioned many times in the Black household, often immediately following suspected accidental magic. His parents would argue about whether the magic present was enough to put his or Sirius’s names in the book, or perhaps brag that their names had been in the book since birth. Though the book was well known, the actual mechanics of it were still largely a mystery to the wizarding public.

“The Book of Admittance,” Dumbledore began explaining, “is a powerful magical item containing the names of every magical child ever born. It, along with its counterpart, the Quill of Acceptance, are largely misunderstood artifacts. Though it is true that no human hands have touched the book since the founders of Hogwarts created it, it is not completely isolated. In fact, I find myself spending time in its presence when I need a moment to think, and I do so often need that moment.”

Regulus watched the man carefully and was watched in return, but he couldn’t make out where he might be going with this. Somewhere in the back of his thoughts, he was registering

the fact that he was being derailed from his earlier tirade. But he couldn't quite grasp his anger anymore, instead, he felt an unsettling protectiveness curve around him, like his magic was preparing for an attack.

“I have read that people believe a name is only written once the child shows sufficient signs of magical abilities, but this is a myth,” Dumbledore continued. “You see, all the names of your peers, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, all of them were written on the date of their birth. Their magic did not mature as they did, it is an innate thing they are born with.”

Regulus felt a cold sweat break out along his skin. Now this made more sense. Obviously, his name was shared with the Ministry via the goblins at Gringotts, but that didn't mean that he was added to the Book. Regulus wondered if it was even possible to be added twice. He found himself spiraling with existential thoughts of whether he had ever been recognized as dead, or if magic considered him one and the same as his former self. His thoughts were interrupted by Dumbledore's calm musings.

“So, you can imagine my surprise when the name Regulus Arcturus Black appeared in the book only a few months before he was due to start his first year.”

“My mother did not raise me here. I was not even sure I was coming to Hogwarts originally, she almost sent me abroad for school,” Regulus tried to explain, though his voice wasn't even convincing to his own ears.

“Ah, yes, so I have heard,” Dumbledore said, “but then again, I never said it was every child that would attend Hogwarts. The Book contains the name of every magical child ever born, regardless of where they are born, or what school they may eventually gain admittance to.”

Regulus sat frozen in his chair. Dumbledore was still looking at him with kind patience, but Regulus couldn't help feeling like an animal caught in a trap.

“Even more surprising,” Dumbledore said, leaning back in his chair slightly, “was the exact name it wrote.”

“My name,” Regulus mumbled confusedly.

“Regulus Arcturus Black,” Dumbledore paused, “the second.”

“Oh,” Regulus said helplessly.

“How strange it is to see that exact name appear twice in my lifetime. Especially considering I received news from the Ministry only a few short weeks later telling me of a new Black heir, Regulus Arcturus Black the Third.”

Regulus stared at him wide-eyed. Why would he wait until now to bring this up? Why not question Regulus about it the moment he saw the name? Or the night he arrived at the school and was sorted into Gryffindor? Why wait an entire school year? Why wait until Regulus had broken through his poorly crafted traps and stolen the Philosopher's stone?

“You know, using the Mirror of Erised wasn’t in my original plan for hiding the stone, but after Harry discovered it, I thought perhaps it would be enough to deter anyone from making it past the final test. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that’s saying something.”

Regulus did not feel that this was the appropriate time to start bragging about one's brilliance, but he was too confused to truly question it. Why Dumbledore had shifted the conversation so abruptly was a mystery to Regulus.

“You see, only one who wanted to find the stone, find it, but not use it, would be able to get it,” Dumbledore explained. “Otherwise they would just see themselves using the stone’s effects: drinking the Elixir of Life, or making gold.” Dumbledore looked at him expectantly, but Regulus wasn’t sure what he was supposed to tell him.

“I only wanted to keep the stone away from the Dark Lord,” Regulus explained. Dumbledore nodded like this was exactly what he wanted to hear.

“I do not know why, or how, you are here, Mr. Black, but it is clear that you are a different person than you were. Or at least different from the person you once presented yourself to be.”

Regulus’s mouth fell open in shock. Dumbledore had no idea who Regulus was, now or before his death. Though perhaps the headmaster knew more than he was letting on, Regulus couldn’t tell.

“Harry’s life will always be in danger, as long as Voldemort survives.” Regulus flinched at the name. “He will need our help, your help, and I will not stop you from offering it.”

Later, Regulus would realize that he had been expertly maneuvered out of the answers he was seeking, most notably why Dumbledore thought it was a good idea to hide something like the stone in a castle full of children and why Harry was left with muggle relatives who seemed to neglect him, but at that moment, he was only thankful that the headmaster seemed so understanding.

It took several days for Harry to wake up.

Hermione was waiting for Regulus the moment he returned to the common room, and though she had a million questions, he didn’t have the energy to answer them. He went to bed immediately, placating her with the promise to explain everything tomorrow, and was asleep before his head hit the pillow. He dreamt of turbans and stones, and cold, dead hands grasping at his skin.

He was shaken awake by a very nervous-looking Neville and once he was awake enough to remember where he was, Neville asked where Ron and Harry were.

“You guys did something to get in trouble, didn’t you?” Neville asked, his voice tinged with worry.

“Yes,” Regulus answered honestly because that was exactly what they had done.

“Oh Merlin, how many points did you lose this time?!” Neville yelled, distressed.

“None yet,” Regulus replied, slightly surprised by the answer. “Though the day is still young and I haven’t spoken to anyone but Dumbledore.”

“You had to speak to the headmaster?” Neville’s eyes were opened wider than Regulus had ever seen them.

“Yes, it was rather an odd night,” Regulus explained before realizing that he probably shouldn’t be telling Neville anything about what happened. “Now, if you do not mind, I’m going to shower.”

He showered off the last remnants of the dream, and Neville had left by the time he was back in the dorm. He headed down to the common room and saw Hermione sitting in one of the overstuffed chairs in front of the fire, chewing nervously on her thumbnail. The rest of the common room was mercifully empty.

“Good morning, Hermione,” Regulus said quietly. She jumped up from her spot and hugged him fiercely.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, pulling back a moment later. “I was just so worried and there was no time to do that last night. I’m so glad you’re okay. I already went to the Hospital Wing this morning. Harry and Ron are both still asleep, but Madam Pomfrey said they should be fine.”

“Oh, good,” Regulus said, the tightness in his chest abating instantly.

“Now, tell me what happened!” Hermione all but yelled. Regulus led her back to the chairs and proceeded to tell her about the mirror and the confrontation with Quirrell and the Dark Lord, though of course, he left out the Dark Lord’s mentions of his past self. He also left out the part about Harry destroying Quirrell’s body, essentially leading to the man’s death. He wasn’t sure if Harry would want that kind of thing shared, and he definitely didn’t feel comfortable explaining such a graphic death to a twelve-year-old.

Hermione seemed even more shocked that Harry had discovered that it was Quirrell, rather than Snape, who was working for the Dark Lord. Harry had zeroed in on the Potion’s professor and so any other option had clearly not occurred to him, not that Regulus was much better, but Hermione responded like her entire sense of self had been shaken, like her failure to see the signs was a personal flaw.

“Of course, I ran into Quirrell right before I lit Snape’s cloak on fire,” Hermione said. Regulus chuckled helplessly and she shot him a look so distressed that he immediately sobered. “No wonder Snape was always going after Quirrell, why he was trying to figure him out. And Hagrid always claimed that Snape wasn’t trying to hurt Harry, but he never said *anything* about Quirrell. It all makes sense, why didn’t I see it?”

“Hermione, honestly,” Regulus said gently. “Those are hardly signs. There was no way for you to notice those things. Of course, Hagrid never defended Quirrell, we never accused him

and Hagrid never had to. I'm sure he would have said the exact same thing about Quirrell as he did Snape, I mean even Quirrell had a hand in protecting the stone. You're being too hard on yourself. I didn't even see the signs."

"Why would that matter?" she whispered furiously. "Why should you be picking up signs where I missed them? You know I'm just as smart as you." Regulus rolled his eyes. Hermione had been told privately by Flitwick that she received the highest grade in the class and she was still obviously riding high from that success.

"I know that, thank you. I'm just saying that you're not the only one. Quirrell fooled all of us, not just you. Besides, we stopped him in the end. If anything, I think Snape would have been a much more formidable foe."

"Why?" Hermione asked, but Regulus realized that he had no way of explaining his past knowledge of the man.

"He just seems the type," Regulus said. "But anyways, you shouldn't blame yourself. It all worked out. Dumbledore said that Harry and Ron would both be fine, plus the stone is back in his hands so it's hardly our problem now." Hermione looked unconvinced but she let it drop for the time being.

It turned out that Ron had much the same reaction when he finally woke up later that afternoon. *Bloody Gryffindors*, Regulus thought. They were always so quick to take on the blame for something, always finding a way to blame themselves. Regulus was very careful not to think about the Gryffindors he used to know, though he was positive this was a consistent trait among them.

Ron bombarded him with questions about what happened with Quirrell and he was surprisingly more perceptive about what Regulus was leaving out, asking specific questions about what happened to Quirrell and where he was if he was no longer at the school. "Dumbledore took care of him," became Regulus's go-to answer, though he was sure it was the house elves who were forced to clean up the dusty remains of Professor Quirrell.

Harry finally awoke two days later. Regulus, Hermione, and Ron found him sitting up and talking to Dumbledore when they came to visit him after lunch.

"Harry!" Ron and Hermione yelled in unison. Both Harry and Dumbledore looked up at them. Dumbledore murmured something quickly to Harry and Regulus watched as Harry gave him a kind nod before the headmaster took his leave.

"You're awake!" Ron yelled cheerfully.

"How are you feeling?" Hermione said.

Ron and Hermione spoke over one another as they ran to his bedside. Regulus followed at a slower pace and noticed that Dumbledore gave him a small smile on his way out. Regulus tried to return it, but he wasn't sure he succeeded.

Harry was all smiles as he spoke to his friends, looking more relaxed than he had in months. He finally looked like the happy child that he was supposed to be, rather than the haunted adult that Regulus often found himself interacting with. They only had a few minutes to catch up before Madam Pomfrey shooed them away from the Hospital Wing, telling them that Harry still needed his rest in order to recover.

Harry was still in the Hospital Wing on the day of the end-of-year feast though he had luckily been permitted to attend. Regulus went up to speak with him alone right before and was treated to a very emotional Hagrid apologizing for putting Harry, and the stone, in danger. Regulus stayed out of sight though, not keen on speaking to the man at the moment. Once Hagrid left, Regulus snuck in to speak with Harry alone.

“Hey Reg,” Harry said, giving him a wide smile, though it dimmed quickly for some reason.

“How are you, Harry?” Regulus asked, taking a seat in a chair next to Harry’s bed.

“I’m fine,” Harry answered with an easy shrug. “And you?”

“Fine,” Regulus replied and an awkward silence fell between the two of them. It was clear that Harry was holding something back, he had a slightly uncomfortable look on his face, so Regulus waited patiently to see if he would go on.

“Regulus, I -” Harry paused and chewed on his lip thoughtfully.

“Go ahead, I know you want to ask something,” Regulus said.

“It’s just... are you really named after one of Voldemort’s followers?” Regulus let out a slow breath before answering. He should have seen this coming, but he wasn’t sure whether Harry remembered the details of Regulus’s conversation with the Dark Lord. He should have realized that Harry was far more observant than he was given credit for.

“Yes, the last Regulus Black was a Death Eater,” Regulus said, trying his best to keep his voice even.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said and Regulus jolted slightly.

“Why are you sorry?” Regulus asked mystified.

“I know it must not be easy to be named after someone like that,” Harry said with a grim look on his face.

“No...” Regulus paused, “No, it’s not. Though many people in my family were supporters of the Dark Lord, not just Regulus. It is unavoidable I’m afraid when you come from a family so keen on reusing names.”

“Was...” Harry started, Regulus nodded for him to continue though in reality he desperately wanted this conversation to end, “was your dad a... what did you call them?”

“A Death Eater?” Regulus clarified. Harry nodded. “Sirius was... well, he wasn’t...” Regulus stumbled over his words. The Sirius he knew and grew up with would have died rather than

become a Death Eater. He nearly did when his mother gave Sirius the ultimatum of becoming one of them or being tortured to death. However, Sirius eventually betrayed James to the Dark Lord. In the end, even Sirius scampered back to the Dark Lord's side. "Yes," Regulus settled on. "Yes, he was a Death Eater."

Harry grimaced though his face quickly settled into one of sympathy. "What happened to him?" Regulus watched Harry closely, it was clear that the child was just trying to understand, though he seemed very sensitive to how Regulus might feel.

"He got what he deserved," Regulus said simply. The conversation drifted into easier topics after that and Regulus was glad for it. It wasn't long after that the two of them headed down to the feast together. Regulus noticed that people stopped speaking when they entered and some of them were even standing up to watch Harry walk to his seat.

Luckily, it wasn't long before Dumbledore began his end-of-year speech. Dumbledore went through tallying the points for each house, placing Gryffindor in last place and Slytherin in first. Regulus all but tuned out the numbers, it had been a long time since he cared about house points, though it was clear that his fellow Gryffindors didn't feel the same.

"However, recent events must be taken into account," Dumbledore said, cutting through the cheering coming from the Slytherin table. Regulus looked up quickly and when he noticed the devious twinkle in Dumbledore's eye, as well as the furious look on Snape's face, he knew Dumbledore was about to destroy the Slytherins' night.

"First, to Mr. Ronald Weasley for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor House fifty points." Ron's face was so red it looked like it was about to catch on fire, but Regulus could see the pride there when they heard Percy bragging loudly about Ron being his brother.

"Second, to Miss Hermione Granger for unending loyalty to her friends, I award Gryffindor House fifty points." Hermione buried her head in her arms, likely overwhelmed by the attention.

"Third, to Mr. Regulus Black for perseverance in the face of great danger, I award Gryffindor House fifty points." The Gryffindor table continued to scream and cheer, but Regulus couldn't help but give a small eye roll at the sentiment. Perseverance isn't the word he would use for what he had done, but if Dumbledore wanted to paint him that way, then there wasn't anything he could do to stop him.

"We're only 10 points behind Slytherin," Neville said, his voice struck with awe.

"And finally, to Mr. Harry Potter for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor House sixty points." The entire hall burst into noise with both Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw cheering alongside Gryffindor. Regulus looked over to the Slytherin table to see the stricken faces of the children who just had their victory ripped out from under them. Regulus grimaced, and though the children around him were swallowed up in excitement, Regulus couldn't find it in himself to join them.

The rest of the night went by quickly and before Regulus knew it, they were back in their dorm packing up their trunks. He had almost forgotten about their exam results with everything going on. Hermione had the best grades of their year, unsurprisingly, and even Ron and Harry did well. Regulus wasn't far behind Hermione, though technically he was fourth behind Draco Malfoy and Padma Patil. Regulus didn't think this was too bad considering he was specifically trying not to draw attention to himself.

They packed their trunks the night after the feast, or at least, Regulus packed his trunk. Hermione had been packed for days and trailed after them up to the boys' dorm. Neville, Dean, and Seamus seemed to have gotten used to her intermittent presence and went about their nights as if she wasn't even there.

"Are you going to pack?" Hermione asked Ron and Harry.

Ron shrugged, but Harry responded, "I don't have much to pack anyways, I'll just do it in the morning." He leaned back on his bed with his hands behind his head.

"It feels strange that the year is over," Hermione mused. "What are you all doing for the summer?"

"Nothing I expect," Ron answered with a slightly bitter twist of his lips. "Probably just chores, playing Quidditch, the usual."

"And doing your classwork," Hermione nettled, but Ron only shrugged again. She turned her attention to Harry.

"Probably the same for me," Harry answered, but there was a distinct look of sadness on his face, "without the Quidditch of course. Can hardly play Quidditch in the middle of a muggle neighborhood."

"Which neighborhood is that exactly?" Regulus asked, but Harry didn't answer.

"What about you, Regulus?" Hermione prompted. She looked extremely curious to hear his answer which unsettled Regulus for some reason.

"I'll be in France I believe, with my mother," he said.

"I'll be visiting France as well," Hermione said excitedly. "Perhaps we can meet up." Regulus gave her an empty smile.

"Yes, maybe," he answered, though he knew he would be spending his summer locked away in Grimmauld place.

They went to bed soon after, but Regulus couldn't stop thinking about Harry at his muggle relatives' house, all alone during the summer with a group of people who didn't seem to care for Harry the way he deserved to. It made his stomach twist painfully, but he wasn't sure what he could do about it.

The ride back to London the next day was depressing. Ron and Hermione were clearly excited about the break and to see their families, but Harry grew more and more morose as

they approached the city. They tried to engage him in conversation, but it was clear that he was just placating them with his responses.

Regulus resolved to keep in close contact with the boy over the summer. He had grown worried about his home life over the course of the year and his behavior on the train was even more concerning. Seeing Harry walk off with his Uncle Vernon made Regulus feel vaguely ill.

He waved to the others before Kreacher arrived to apparate him back to Grimmauld. When he was back in the quiet, dusty home, he felt the walls closing in on him immediately. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself before he straightened his shoulders.

“Kreacher,” he said and the elf popped into existence next to him, “bring me tea in the library. I have work to do.”

the soul match.

The weeks of summer passed very quickly for Regulus. Although, Grimmauld Place became like a tomb for him as the days wore on. He did his best to avoid his mother's painting. Since the first time he encountered it, she was constantly simpering at him. She had never been that sickly sweet in life, at least not to him in private. She was never quite as cruel as she was with Sirius, though he had faced his fair share of punishments from her. It made his skin crawl to be in her presence.

He spent most of his time in the Black Family Library, often sleeping in one of the stiff leather chairs in front of the small fire after spending the day reading and researching. He had one goal for the summer: figure out how to destroy a Horcrux.

He only had a few books that mentioned anything about Horcruxes, but he ventured out a few times to Diagon and Knockturn Alley to find books on soul magic. He would wake up and reread his disorganized notes before working through the newest books he had found, then he would spend a few tiring hours trying every spell he could possibly think of on the Horcrux. At first, he tried to be careful, doing a full week of research before he tried so much as an Incendio on the locket, but as the days and weeks passed, he grew more desperate, often throwing the same curses over and over again just to see if it would make a difference.

That morning went much the same. He woke with a sudden gasp in the uncomfortable leather chair, his back protesting at the sleeping position. He knew he'd been having a nightmare, mostly because of his racing heartbeat and the sweat drenching his forehead, but he couldn't seem to remember what it was about.

He took in the room around him. The book he had been reading the night before, an ill-researched book on soulmates that read more like a romance novel than a textbook, was lying splayed open on the floor in front of him. It had most likely fallen when he'd drifted off to sleep the night before. *A Soul's Match* by Alvina Ackerly was one of his last-ditch efforts to find anything helpful relating to his search, but he should have guessed from the title that it would be useless. He picked up the book and checked the page it was opened to, the beginning of a section on soulmates and death.

"Though a soul is complete on its own, the mate's soul is still colloquially referred to as a fractured element of one's soul. The tie between these two fractures expands beyond distance and time, as we discovered in the past chapter with our discussion of Henrietta and Cyril, the soulmates born one hundred years apart on opposite sides of the world.

However, the string between the two souls also stretches between the worlds of the living and the dead. It is not uncommon to read tales of those with soulmates who have passed on hearing the voice of their love from beyond the grave. In fact, some have even walked to their death following the call of the other half of their soul. Most interestingly, is the theory that the use of a soulmate could be essential in the practice of necromancy, the art of bringing someone back from the dead. In this chapter, we will discuss the possibility of pulling someone from the realm of the dead using their living counterpart."

Regulus threw the book to the other side of the room, already giving up on reading the chapter. He watched as it slid under one of the bookshelves, still open to the page he was on, face down on the floor. He was hoping it would provide context on how someone would use a Horcrux, an object that held a piece of their soul, to come back from the brink of death, but it was clear that this author was nothing but a fraud capitalizing on people's desire for a 'soulmate,' a ridiculous concept altogether.

Regulus climbed out of the chair soon after and called Kreacher to bring his morning tea and breakfast. He paced the room as he drank his tea, eyeing the large circular table in the middle of the room. In the center of the table, lay the cursed locket. As the summer stretched on, Regulus found himself spending more and more time with the item, feeling the need to keep it nearby. He wasn't sure why, but sometimes when he was just drifting off to sleep, he would imagine someone breaking into Grimmauld and stealing the locket out from under him.

Today the locket seemed to mock him. Though it never moved or showed any sign of housing a living soul, some days it seemed to take on a personality. During the first few days in close proximity to it, Regulus felt nothing beyond the first moment when he heard James yelling at him, but eventually, he began to feel a clawing in his chest. After a few weeks, the anger and pain began to seep into all of his thoughts.

He had a much harder time collecting and blocking out unwelcome thoughts while being trapped in Grimmauld, and it was only made worse in the presence of the locket. He would try to use Occlumency to force out the memories trying to swim to the surface in his mind, but it was never quite as clean as it could have been.

"You've ruined us, Reg. You ruined us with this. Why? I don't - I don't understand why you would choose this. Why didn't you tell me this was going to happen? You could have come to me, or Sirius, or anyone. We would have helped you. Aren't you going to say anything?! Are you just going to stare at me? Regulus, please."

Regulus stood up from the table, eyeing the locket with disdain. It was slightly easier to push the memories away when he was moving. He wanted to do something, at least get out of the house, but he felt drawn to the dark magic within the locket. It curled around him when he slept, drawing him in.

He had tried during the first few weeks of summer to get out of the house when he still felt capable of doing so. He ended up apparating to the cemetery in Godric's Hollow, though the pain in his chest seemed to expand the closer he got to it. He knew Godric's Hollow was where James had died, and he knew he was buried there, but he wasn't sure what else he was expecting to find in a place where something so awful could have happened.

In the end, it didn't matter because there was already someone at the grave, a tall man wearing a shabby ill-fitting robe, and Regulus chickened out before the man could spot him, apparating home and collapsing at the entryway of Grimmauld when the excessive magic required for the apparition proved too much for his tiny body.

"You're not my brother. You are just like the rest of them. What? Are you going to go tattle on me to Walburga? Tell her who I've been spending time with, like all your other little friends aren't already doing that?"

Regulus shook his head sharply to dislodge the memory. That one wasn't even the worst fight he and his brother had, but for some reason, those words continued to ring in his ears. *You're not my brother*, became the sentence that haunted Regulus even till his dying breath.

During one of his worst days of the summer, Regulus attempted to visit Azkaban. Since he was publicly the son of Sirius Black he should have had some visitation rights, but he barely got to the Ministry before he was dismissed. Sirius wasn't allowed visitors. He was one of the highest security prisoners in Azkaban, and he wouldn't be allowed human contact beyond the minimal interactions he had with guards.

"He was quite the cowardly thing, the Regulus Black I knew. He would have never dared to draw his wand against me, too afraid of what might be done to him. Although there was talk..."

"Enough," Regulus spoke aloud to the empty room. He blew out a breath and decided that it would be best to spend a little time away from the library. However, he only made it to the second floor before he felt pulled back to the room, back to the locket. The magic around it seemed to buzz unpleasantly, like a shrill ringing that grew louder as time went on. Regulus had begun to hear the sound in his sleep.

The words the Dark Lord had spoken to him haunted him in the same way the words from Sirius and James did. And why wouldn't they? The Dark Lord was right after all. He was a coward, never brave enough to stand up to the Dark Lord or his family. Never brave enough to go after James like he wanted to, or reach out to Sirius after he left Regulus behind. His one moment of so-called bravery ended in his untimely demise, or sort of did, he supposed. Regardless, he did not enjoy thinking about his cowardly past.

He only managed to stay away from the library for an hour or so before he felt the need to go back and check that the locket was still where he left it, a nervous habit that Regulus was not proud of. Like most days, he pulled out his notes on Horcruxes. Most of the notes now were filled with spells that he was sure would not work to destroy the dreadful things.

Horcruxes: an item that a wizard uses to hide a piece of his soul in order to achieve eternal life. The object becomes impervious to damage and decay. The object will appear completely unscathed and clean even years after creation and multiple destructive spells cast upon it.

Creation: Wizard must split the soul - murder without remorse followed by an unknown ritual to place the soul fragment in the object.

Resurrection? Unknown. Philosopher's stone (destroyed)

Effects on others: Buzzing feeling after long-term interaction. Could feel cool or hot to the touch depending.

Destruction: Anything that could destroy the object beyond repair. Fiendfire? Perhaps opening the locket before casting spells on the item. Locket does not open by normal means. Avada Kedavra on the inside?

Spells that have proven fruitless against object: Aberto and Alohomora will not open the locket

Accio - cannot be summoned or located using Revelio

Avada Kedavra has no apparent effect on the outside of the locket. Neither do other Unforgivables

Diffindo, Bombardo, Reducto, Incendio, and Confringo all have no effect on outside of the locket

Regulus felt more and more distressed as he read through the notes. They were thin and useless. He couldn't find any information on how the Dark Lord would even use the locket should he get his hands on it. Nor did he fully understand how a Horcrux was created in the first place beyond the vague knowledge that murder splits the soul. It was a frustrating research project. Eventually, he gave up reading his short notes hoping they would magically provide the answer, and instead picked up another vague book about soul magic and began to read.

The summer was proving discouraging at least and distressing at best. His research was slow going and he could barely bring himself to cast the repetitive spells on the Horcrux as his body became exhausted much faster than an adult's would. And that was only taking into consideration the normal, neutral magic spells that Regulus knew. He tried to cast a few of the dark magic incantations that he had learned growing up in Grimmauld, but he could barely make it through the entire spell before he slumped with exhaustion. He was worried that soon he would be back on the train to Hogwarts no better off than he was to begin with.

The most concerning thing about the summer, however, was the fact that Harry Potter had not spoken a word to Regulus or any of his other friends. Regulus wasn't one for writing letters to the group of children, but he tried to force himself to keep in contact, especially with Harry whom he worried about incessantly, but Harry hadn't written back even once. At first, he was insulted and a little hurt, before he realized that Ron and Hermione were also faced with silence from the boy.

He had purchased several sets of clothing for Harry at the beginning of the summer. Ordering them from one of his favorite wizard robe shops in France. Harry was a similar size to Regulus, a little too small for his age, so he used his own measurements and then had the employees infuse the clothing with magic that would stretch and shrink the clothing to Harry's exact size. He packaged it up two days before July 31st and sent it off for Harry's birthday, but he never heard back.

Regulus cursed himself for not finding out where Harry lived before he went home for the summer, then he could have just gone and checked on him in person. He should have asked Dumbledore when he'd had the chance. He grew more and more anxious as the summer passed, but finally had a bit of good news when one morning a gray owl was scratching at the window carrying a letter from Ron and Harry.

Regulus,

Last night Fred and George helped me take my dad's flying car to rescue Harry. Did I tell you about the car? I can't remember. Mum says not to tell people, but I don't see the big deal. Anyways it turns out Harry's muggle family was keeping him locked in his room. There were bars on his window! We had to rip them off to free him! But anyway, he's here with us at the Burrow.

We are planning to go to Diagon Alley next Wednesday to get our school supplies, do you want to meet us there? Write me back. I'll tell Errol to wait.

Ron Weasley

A flying car? Regulus had never heard of such a thing. He should have known that people as prone to mischief as Fred and George would have a parent with the same general disregard for rules. He shook his head. At least Harry was all right now, safe for the time being with Weasleys, but the thought of him locked in a room with bars on his window made Regulus clench his teeth in rage. He had known last year that all wasn't right with Harry, but now he was sure he should have done more to watch out for the boy. He would have to do a better job next summer. He pulled out the next letter.

Dear Regulus,

I'm sorry I have not sent any letters this summer. I haven't been getting any from you all. Apparently, a house elf was stealing them to try and convince me not to return to Hogwarts. Can you believe that? I will fill you in more when I see you.

Harry

This child could not have one single moment of peace, could he? He wondered what had happened to all the expensive clothing he'd purchased for the boy. He would have to get Kreacher to find it for him, otherwise, he would need to place another order before school. He was hoping he'd be able to give it to Harry when none of their other friends were around, hoping to not needlessly embarrass the boy, but now he felt like that might not be an option.

Regulus had to work to calm himself after that. He would have to get more details from Harry, and then figure out whom the house elf belonged to. He was sure Kreacher would be able to figure out who he was. He grabbed a piece of parchment and scrawled a quick reply to Ron and Harry telling them that he would meet them at Diagon when they went.

the ritual.

Chapter Notes

content warning: descriptions of torture

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A few days before Regulus was set to meet Ron and Harry in Diagon Alley, he felt like he had reached the end of his rope. He had already moved on to consider the effects a dementor, the soul-eating creatures that they were, might have on a Horcrux. Choosing not to focus on the fact that they were practically uncontrollable and there was no way to access one except to visit Azkaban. He was on the brink of ripping his hair out in frustration when he came across a promising footnote.

He had been sending out feelers to different parts of the world searching for rare texts on soul-related magic and had received a very old book from an unknown sender. The book came with no return letter or reference of who might have sent it, but it was more helpful than expected. Anima Vinculum - soul bond in Latin - by Wesley Lochlannson felt as old as the books that lined the walls of the Black ancestral home. It was barely staying together, and Regulus thought that it was most likely magic that held the pages to the spine. The entire book was written in Latin, which wasn't uncommon for an older book written in the wizarding world. Regulus was grateful for his extensive training in the language he'd had as a child.

At first, Regulus thought the book was going to be another dead end until he noticed a small note at the end of one chapter. He would have grazed right over it except there was a tiny hand-drawn symbol in the corner. It looked like a circle with an elongated t-shape through the center and it was written in red ink. At least, Regulus assumed it was red ink, and he wasn't too keen on questioning that thought.

“The Breiða Sjáflr is a ritual passed on between Master and Student beginning as early as 800 AD. The ritual serves to open a magic practitioner to the knowledge of the world beyond by temporarily removing their soul from their body. Legend has it that the spell itself was incredibly difficult and could result in one's death if the soul was not returned correctly. Not much is known about the ritual's specifics beyond the ritualistic poem used.

“First, the Master would cast a spell on themselves, preparing themselves for the journey. Then, the poem would be used to disconnect the soul from the Student. Finally, after the two had learned all that was available to them, the ritual would be closed with an end. Though there are no written records of what may take place during the ritual, it is theorized that in some instances the Student would sever the ritual by ending the life of their Master, ascending to their place in their stead.”

While this wasn't much to go on, Regulus immediately felt intrigued. A ritual that could remove a soul from someone, or maybe even something, and allow him to physically sever the soul's hold on the person or item. It sounded like the perfect, perhaps a bit complicated, solution to the problem posed by the Horcrux. He flipped through the book, hoping to find another mention of it, but there was none. He was about to move on when he noticed a page at the back of the book was half glued to the book's cover. He pulled it up gently, taking care not to rip it, and found another drawing of the symbol he noticed next to the footnote, except this time, it wasn't the only thing on the page. Written on the page in red ink next to it was:

Breiða Sjáflr

Fyrsta.

Opnask.

Miðr.

Leysaheim í hug.

Verpa skyldr.

Ganga fram dalr dauði.

Léttir.

Heimta önd.

Áðr létti.

Fúinn vili kljúfa Beinlausi.

Regulus read through the ritual again and again. He didn't speak the language used and he wasn't sure how to pronounce most of the words, but he at least had a path to follow. He copied down the text onto a slip of paper and headed out to muggle London. He originally thought of going to one of the bookstores in Diagon Alley, but he didn't want to risk someone else reading the ritual. There was no telling what kind of damage it could do. Instead, he went to a large muggle library near Grimmauld Place.

He wore a casual set of trousers and a button-up shirt, forgoing his robe. He'd never spent much time in the muggle world, but he also didn't want to stick out too much. Before he left, he slipped the locket around his neck, too anxious to leave it behind that day. He only made it a few blocks from Grimmauld when he noticed the odd and curious looks he was getting

from strangers. At one point he noticed a group of children pointing and snickering at him. It was only then that he realized how differently he was dressed compared to them. While he wore a clean and perhaps a little too formal outfit, the other kids wore blue denim pants and short-sleeved shirts.

He itched at the skin below the locket, it was already growing irritated even in the short span of time, and headed back home. He needed a way to blend in with the muggles. He already felt far too paranoid about spending time out of the house and if he went to a muggle library and spent the entire afternoon being stared at by strangers, he would probably lose his mind. This left only one solution.

Despite spending months at Grimmauld since he came back to life, Regulus had not once ventured into Sirius's old bedroom. The thought of it lying empty for more than a decade made him feel ill and sad. Though he hated his brother and had for a long time, there was still something that pulled at his chest when he thought about his abandoned bedroom. However, he knew he needed muggle clothing, and there was only one way to get that that didn't include shopping at a muggle store on his own.

The room was covered in dust. Kreacher and Sirius had always hated one another, and it was clear that Kreacher made no effort to clean the bedroom once Sirius left. When he was young, Regulus would often wonder why his mother and father left the room the way it was. After Sirius was gone, he expected them to clean out his stuff or burn it like they always threatened to do, but instead, his mother locked the door and left it as a tomb.

Regulus coughed when the dust collecting on every surface was disturbed by his entrance. He tried his hardest not to let the memories of his brother pull him under, but it was so hard seeing Sirius's still unmade bed.

"What?" Sirius snapped. He was sitting on the floor, his back against the mattress, his legs curled up against his chest.

"Are you okay?" Regulus asked, letting the door shut behind him.

"Like you give a shit," Sirius responded, turning his head violently away from Regulus. Regulus crouched down on the floor beside him despite his reaction.

"Do you want me to clean it?" Regulus asked softly. Sirius looked over at him and Regulus noticed the tears pooling in his eyes. At only thirteen, Sirius had learned how to keep his tears from falling. The punishments were always worse when they let their tears fall. He blinked hard to clear them and looked like he was about to shake his head no before he paused.

"Okay," Sirius conceded finally. Sirius was still shirtless, so his bloody back stained the sheets of his bed when he leaned against it. He turned with his back to Regulus and Regulus grabbed a wet cloth from the bathroom, using it gently to clean the open wounds.

His mother was always more violent with Sirius, more likely to make him bleed. When Regulus disobeyed his punishments were always internal, days without eating, silencing him with a spell so he couldn't speak for a week, using the Imperius curse to make him behave at

family gatherings, and when she wanted to hear him suffer, harsh stinging curses. But with Sirius, his mother always left marks. Not that the use of those other punishments didn't make the rotation, but Sirius almost always left bloody.

Regulus shook away the memory. He felt like he was going to vomit for a moment and only barely managed to stop the feeling. He took several deep breaths, trying to push away the thoughts of Sirius and his unshed tears. Regulus must have been the same age that he was now, at least physically. Far too young to be dealing with such things. He wondered if those punishments were the reason for Sirius's ultimate betrayal. He thought about how eventually Regulus stopped coming to help him after Sirius was punished. He wondered how much of Sirius's betrayal was his fault.

He wasn't sure how much time passed, but he eventually managed to remember his purpose for entering the room. He opened Sirius's closet. There were clothes strewn about, some in small piles. The expensive wizard robes were hung up, untouched for years even before Sirius escaped. He made quick work of searching through the piles before he found a pair of dark blue denim trousers and a black shirt with a group of men on the front. Both of the items were too big for him and had a slight smell to them, but he cast a few quick spells to clean and shrink the items.

When he finally left the house again, now in Sirius's old clothing, he felt both more anxious and more relaxed than he did before. At least now there wasn't anyone looking at him oddly. He tucked the locket under the shirt, letting it sit against his bare skin. As he made his way to the library, he wondered if this was how it would have felt to walk around if he'd left with Sirius.

"Hello," Regulus greeted a young woman at the front desk when he entered the library.

"Hi, do you need help?" she asked, a peculiar look on her face. She seemed to be eyeing his shirt closely.

"Yes, thank you. Can you tell me where I might find books about different languages?" he asked. She seemed momentarily confused by his question. "Books for translations."

"Oh," she mumbled. "Yes, third floor to your right. Is there a specific language you're looking for?" Regulus hesitated. He knew he didn't want to show another wizard the ritual he was researching, but a muggle would have no use for the words.

"Yes, I'm trying to translate this," he said, handing her the piece of parchment with the spell copied onto it.

"Where did you get this?" she asked curiously.

Regulus shrugged. "Is that relevant?" he asked, trying his hardest not to be overly rude, but he also did not have an excuse prepared that he could use.

She smirked. "I suppose not." She handed the parchment back to him. "Just an odd piece of paper." Regulus had no idea what that could possibly mean. "Big Black Sabbath fan, are you?"

“I’m sorry?” Regulus asked alarmed. She pointed at his shirt, giving him a sardonic smile. “Oh, erm, yes, love Black-” He looked down again to read the words he had ignored earlier. “Black Sabbath.” Her smile stretched into something more genuine and he got the distinct feeling that he was being laughed at.

“I think that might be an older Germanic language, like Swedish or Danish,” she offered. “I’d probably start there.”

Regulus gave her a smile. “Thank you,” he said quickly before scampering up the stairs. He started in the Germanic languages as she suggested, though it took a while to figure out that the language he was looking for was Old Norse. It made sense given when the ritual was dated back to. The books were slim, with far fewer words for translating than more modern languages offered, but he hoped it would still be enough to figure out the ritual.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” the librarian asked when he walked back down the stairs. Regulus had been planning to steal the book, hoping to sneak out the front door as quickly as possible, but it was clear that she was waiting for him.

“Oh,” Regulus said pausing. “Yes, it was Old Norse.”

“Do you want to check those out?” she asked, nodding to the three books he held under his arm. Regulus looked uncertainly at her. “Do you have a library card?”

“No,” he admitted after a long moment. She gave him the same smirk she had earlier like she knew he was a fish out of water.

“Why don’t we get you signed up for one?” she said kindly. Regulus walked up to the desk, unsure. “I’m assuming you don’t have a parent with you?” she asked though it was clear she already knew the answer.

“Umm, no, I’m alone,” Regulus answered.

“And why is a... twelve?” Regulus gave a small nod. “Twelve-year-old trying to translate an Old Norse poem?” Regulus was not prepared for questions about what he was doing.

“Well,” he said then stopped for a second before continuing. “I’m trying to destroy an evil magical object.” He hadn’t been planning to say that, in fact, he had no idea what he was planning to say, but for some reason, the truth slipped out.

She laughed loudly, only stopping when an old woman gave her a dirty look as she walked past. “You’re funny,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Why do you need to know?” Regulus asked defensively. He didn’t understand her laughter. He was always told that muggles were terrified of magic. He had expected her to attack him on the spot when he mentioned a magical object. If anything, her reaction made him more nervous.

“For your library card?” she said, a chuckle still in her voice.

“Oh,” he murmured, a slight blush spreading across his cheeks. “Regulus Black.”

“That’s a weird name,” she said. She started moving her fingers along a set of buttons as she looked at a large box in front of her. Regulus felt so out of his depth. He wondered if he should have taken Muggle Studies when he first went to school, though he would have likely been disowned on the spot if he did so.

“It’s not that weird,” he defended, though he knew it was. Even in the wizarding world, Regulus was unusual. She smirked at him again.

“Where do you live, Regulus Black?” She asked.

“Why?” Regulus asked. She looked at him like he was an absolute idiot.

“Library card,” she said, pointing at the box in front of her.

“Right,” he said. He couldn’t very well tell her he lived at 12 Grimmauld Place given that it wouldn’t show up for a muggle. “13 Grimmauld Place,” he conceded.

“Naturally,” she mumbled to herself. “Just a moment.” He heard a loud noise in another room and watched as she got up to check on it. He considered making a run for it, though he didn’t want to make a scene and risk having to use magic on a muggle. She returned just a moment later. She took his books from him and returned them after a brief second. “They’re due back in three weeks.”

“Okay, thank you,” he said and turned quickly away from her.

“Wait!” She called. He turned back nervously. “You’re library card.” He walked out of the library shortly after that, looking down at a small white card. Written just below the name of the muggle library: Regulus Black. He couldn’t explain why, but seeing his name printed on the muggle item caused a small smile to stretch across his face.

He worked long into the night, translating and writing pronunciations down for each word. The dictionaries were limited, so by the time he had translated each word to the best of his ability, he was only mildly confident that he understood the ritual. His translation read:

Stretch the Self.

Beginning.

Be opened.

Middle.

Untie the realm of one’s mind.

Cast out your bonds.

Proceed to the valley of neither life or death.

Last.

Recover your breath.

Before the End.

Rotten will splits the boneless.

He had trouble figuring out which parts of the ritual were meant to be spoken and which parts were just indicators of what came first or last. The words themselves were confusing. He knew that the ritual was meant to temporarily remove the soul from the body, but what did it mean by ‘be open?’ Or ‘cast out your bonds?’

When Regulus would look back on this moment, he would wonder how much the isolation of Grimmauld Place had destroyed his logical mind. In his first life, Regulus never did anything without thinking it through, often thinking things through for so long that the opportunity would pass him by without him acting on it. Even when his parents tortured his brother, Regulus stood frozen in the hallway debating whether he should step in or not. He never did step in, his parents growing frustrated with Sirius’s screams before Regulus could settle on a decision.

He remembered hovering over Sirius’s wrecked form. His teeth chattering from the residuals of the Unforgivable spell his mother had used, blood seeping out of one eye, running down the side of his face, and the smell of piss permeating throughout the room after the torture went on so long that Sirius could no longer control his muscles. He was horrified and knew he needed to do something to help him, otherwise, his brother would die right on top of that expensive rug. But Regulus only sat frozen in fear and indecision, weighing all his options over and over again. It wasn’t until he heard Sirius’s wrecked voice.

“Reggie, reg-” Regulus couldn’t bear to hear it. He finally settled on a course of action and brought Sirius through the floo to the Potter’s house. He still woke screaming from nightmares of that night, reliving the moment of his indecision over and over again, except in every dream his brother never made it out. He died every time.

So, no, Regulus was not impulsive, even when someone else might benefit from him being that way. The most impulsive thing he ever did was die while stealing the Dark Lord’s Horcrux and even that he wrestled with for weeks before he took action. So there was no reason why he should be impulsive now and yet, Regulus decided that there was no point in waiting around, in researching more, in trying to understand the very complex and dangerous spell he had only discovered a day before. He took one long look at the locket, hearing the light ring that seemed to always accompany the item, and decided to try the ritual then and there.

He decided on his father's drawing room for the ritual. It was the room he liked the least, most likely due to the violent memories associated with his brother's extended torture that were connected to the space, and he had no qualms with accidentally wrecking it while trying to destroy the locket.

He set the locket on the floor in the center of the room and took a deep breath. There was a niggling thought in the back of his mind that perhaps he shouldn't be doing this, but it was quickly drowned out by the buzzing sound that had become his constant companion that summer. He lifted his wand and began the first part of the ritual.

"Opnask."

The effect was immediate. He felt the words pull at the tethers of his magic like someone unraveling his body, separating it from the mind. He felt a headache split his head but it was gone before he could even really register it. His stomach twisted and intense nausea swept through him, but just like the headache, it was only there for a moment. His skin ached and his limbs felt heavy and weightless all at once.

"Regulus," a far too recognizable voice whispered. Regulus shivered. He could feel himself losing his battle with the ritual, it was dragging him under dark waves of magic. The locket seemed to grow louder, the ringing morphing into a hissing sound, like a snake speaking directly in his ear. Regulus vaguely registered his knees collapsing beneath him.

"Regulus, please," the voice whispered. The voice he had tried so hard to forget, to block out of his memories. "Please." Regulus felt like his magic was being ripped from him while simultaneously working its way into his veins over and over again. He couldn't have pulled his magic back even if he had the wherewithal to try.

"James," he choked out right before the waves swallowed him whole and the world was lost.

"Master Regulus must be more careful."

Regulus grunted painfully.

"Is Master Regulus awake?"

Regulus tried to respond, but his mouth wouldn't obey him. He groaned. The feeling of his body came back slowly, so slow that he worried for a moment that he might never move again, but he finally was able to squint his eyes open. The room was thankfully dark, but it took a moment for his eyes to focus on where he was.

"Master Regulus?" Kreacher's scratchy voice interrupted him. He still couldn't make out the elf in the room, but he could hear his voice coming from beside him.

"Kreacher," Regulus tried to say, though his voice was dry and harsh as it ripped through his throat. His eyes finally seemed to adjust and he realized that he was in his bedroom. The curtains were drawn tight across the window so that no sunlight could get through them.

"What happened?"

“Master Regulus almost died,” Kreacher’s voice wobbled with unshed tears. “Kreacher had to make sure he survived.”

“How long have I been in bed?” Regulus asked, not interested in getting into details of what Kreacher might have done to him to help him survive.

“A week, Master,” Kreacher answered.

“A week?” Regulus asked incredulously, trying at once to sit up, though his body protested the move.

“Master Regulus must not move,” Kreacher said frantically. Regulus laid back down and let his muscles relax.

“What is the date?”

“It is the 2nd of September, Master Regulus,” Kreacher said. Regulus sighed. He could feel the exhaustion settling into his bones, but he fought to stay conscious. He was already a day late to school and would need to do damage control as soon as he was capable of moving, but he felt so heavy and tired.

Eventually, he convinced Kreacher to bring him breakfast as well as all the letters he had missed while unconscious. He had several frantic letters from Ron, Harry, and Hermione, including one from Hermione from the night before asking him if he was with Ron and Harry which Regulus found very concerning. There was also a letter from Professor McGonagall addressed to the fake mother Regulus had created, and one from Dumbledore simply asking if Regulus was in danger. He responded to them all quickly, telling Dumbledore he was safe and would be at the school by that evening. He wrote quick notes to Ron, Harry, and Hermione, just telling them that he would fill them in when he saw them, too tired to write a long-winded explanation.

He wrote with his left hand to make his handwriting different when he drafted the note to McGonagall, signing it Seraphine Bissett, and sending it off. He knew she would require the most explanation, but Regulus decided to keep it to a vague excuse of sickness keeping him from riding the train the first day. He told her that “Regulus will be arriving at the gates of Hogwarts by sundown,” and left it at that.

He sent Kreacher out to purchase his books for school and then had Kreacher pack up his trunk while Regulus limped up to his father’s drawing room to figure out what happened to the locket. The moment he entered the room he nearly doubled over in pain. The ringing sound had dissipated and the soft hissing had completely taken over now. He felt like the locket was speaking to him. He stumbled back out of the room and threw the strongest locking charm he could think of on the door.

“Kreacher,” he called. Kreacher popped into existence next to him. “You are not to go into that room for any reason. The locket should not be touched or moved. If anyone tries to enter the house, come and get me immediately.”

“Yes, Master Regulus.”

Regulus sagged against the wall, the pain he felt in the drawing room finally subsiding enough for him to stand.

“Master Regulus must rest.”

“I’ll rest at school. Is my trunk packed?”

“Yes, Master Regulus.”

Regulus nodded and stumbled back to his room to get dressed. He opted for a set of plain robes since he wouldn’t be arriving at Hogwarts until after dinner and asked Kreacher to apparate him to the gates of Hogwarts. He wasn’t positive that he could manage the difficult magic of apparition at the moment. The locking charm had been enough to drain him completely. Plus, he didn’t know how he would explain to any professors who might see him how he was managing to apparate as a twelve-year-old.

Kreacher was clearly holding himself back from complaining about Regulus leaving so soon, but Regulus chose to ignore him for the time being. He needed to get to school if only to escape the isolation of Grimmauld, and figure out why Ron and Harry were missing the first night back. At the last minute, he remembered the muggle library books on Old Norse that he still had in his possession. He instructed Kreacher to return them to the library when it was empty, leaving them on the front desk. Kreacher was clearly affronted by the request, appalled that he would have to travel to the muggle world to complete the task, but he eventually agreed.

By the time Regulus made it to the gates of Hogwarts, the sun had set and a slight chill swept through him. He shivered slightly, surprised by how affected he felt by the wind, but it felt like his skin was too thin, like the ritual he tried to do had permanently aged him. Professor McGonagall met him right inside the gates and gave him a stern look.

“Where is your mother, Mr. Black?” McGonagall asked, clearly having seen Regulus be dropped off by an elf.

“She sent me with our house elf, Professor,” Regulus answered. He walked towards her, dragging his trunk behind him. He was so concentrated on keeping his voice steady that he ended up stumbling over his own feet. McGonagall was quick, catching him by the elbow before he fell to the ground.

“Are you quite all right, Mr. Black? Your mother mentioned that you were sick,” she said. Her voice was now painted with thinly veiled worry.

“I’m fine, thank you. Just a bit dizzy still,” Regulus said, straightening up. McGonagall did not look convinced, but she took pity on him. She charmed his trunk to follow them and walked with him slowly up to the castle. It took them far longer than it should with the way Regulus continued to stumble periodically. McGonagall was kind enough not to mention it.

“I think it would be best for you to head to the Hospital Wing tonight,” she said once they made it inside. Regulus wanted to argue, but he was too exhausted from the long walk to think of a response. He merely nodded.

Madam Pomfrey was confused about what was wrong with Regulus, and though she asked several questions, Regulus kept his answers as vague as he could. In the end, she left him with a sleeping draught and a potion she said would help strengthen his magic, though he didn't catch the actual name.

He promised to take them after he changed into his pajamas, but by the time he was changed and settled in bed, Madam Pomfrey and McGonagall had left him for the night. A light rain had begun falling outside and Regulus let the sound lull him into a state of relaxation. For the first time since he woke up, he let himself think of the voice he heard when he tried the ritual. He would recognize James's soft whisper anywhere. He longed to hear it again, even just once.

As he finally drifted off to sleep, he heard the maddening hissing of the locket saturate his bones. It was quiet and he had to focus to really make it out, but it was undeniable. The last thought he had was wondering if the locket had somehow followed him to Hogwarts.

Chapter End Notes

did i make my friend (who is obsessed with norse mythology, etymology, and languages) help me design a super complicated norse ritual? you bet i did.

pronunciations:

Breiða Sjáflr (Bray-tha seeYAL-flur)

Fyrsta. (fear-stah)

Opnask. (ohp-nahsk)

Miðr. (mith-ear)

Leysaheim í hug. (LAY-sah-highm ee hoog)

Verpa skyldr. (Ver-PAH SKILL-door)

Ganga fram dalr dauði. (Gon-gah frAHm DAH-lur dow-thee
(dow rhymes with ow not oh))

Léttir. (leh-tear)

Heimta önd. (Highm-teh oo-nd)

Áðr létti. (Ah-thur leh-tee)

Fúinn vili kljúfa Beinlausi. (Foo-in vee-lee kloo-fah byen-low-see (low rhymes with ow not below))

the house elf.

Regulus ate breakfast in the Hospital Wing the next morning. He was too tired to even bother asking if he could go to breakfast with the rest of his classmates. Instead, he just accepted the tray of food from Madam Pomfrey without complaint. He wondered when Harry, Ron, and Hermione would show up, and if they knew he was already at school. Just as he was finishing his meal, Dumbledore came to sit by his bedside.

“Good morning, Mr. Black,” Dumbledore said, as he settled into the seat.

“Headmaster,” Regulus greeted with a slight nod of his head, setting his tray of food off to the side.

“I must say, you gave us all quite the scare,” Dumbledore’s voice was light, but Regulus was surprised to see real concern in his eyes. “Professor McGonagall said that you were ill.” Regulus nodded and when Dumbledore simply waited he decided to explain. He wasn’t sure how much he trusted the old wizard, but it was clear that he would need to say something.

“I may have tried some experimental magic a few days ago,” Regulus said evasively. Dumbledore nodded understandingly like that was a completely normal explanation from a grown man masquerading as a twelve-year-old child.

“Ah, that would do it. What magic have you tried?” Regulus gave him a long look, but couldn’t decide on what to say. “I understand that you do not want to share, but you should know that your friends were very worried when you did not arrive on the train.”

“I didn’t mean to scare them. I didn’t think it would affect me so much, but I am recovering just fine,” Regulus said.

“You did not take your potions,” Dumbledore replied.

“No, I fell asleep before I had the chance. Really, I am just tired. It should not affect me any more than that,” Regulus reassured him. Dumbledore watched him for a moment.

“I am pleased to hear that. You should remember, Mr. Black, that you are not alone and help is available to you.” It was a vague statement, and though Regulus expected nothing less from the headmaster, he understood it all the same. Though he wasn’t sure that he wanted to share his summer’s search, it was oddly comforting to have another adult understand what he was trying to do. He had never been given the benefit of blind trust during his first life, even James always held a slight suspicion of him, he was sure, but to have it given now, to have help offered to him like Regulus was doing something undeniably good was incredibly abnormal. Regardless, it made him feel more secure.

Dumbledore stood up and began to leave the wing, before turning around suddenly. “Mr. Black, if I might ask a question.” Regulus nodded. “Seraphine Bissett?”

“Oh,” Regulus said, understanding immediately, “Yes, she’s my fake mother. She doesn’t actually exist.” He wondered if he should be more careful about sharing that piece of information out loud and looked around quickly to make sure the Hospital Wing was still empty.

“Ah, I see,” Dumbledore said, a light smile on his face. “I had not realized you would create such a fake life for yourself.”

“Well, it’s necessary for certain things. I can hardly go along as a lone child in the wizarding world,” Regulus explained.

Dumbledore nodded before he bid Regulus goodbye and left the wing. The door had only just closed behind him before it was swinging open and Harry, Ron, and Hermione were running in.

“Regulus!” Ron yelled.

“You’re awake,” Harry said at the same time.

The three of them rushed to his bed and surrounded him. Hermione surprised him by throwing her arms around him in a quick hug. Regulus barely had time to hug her back before she pulled away.

“We were so worried,” she said. “I was so worried,” she corrected and threw a glare at Harry and Ron.

“What?” Regulus asked, but Hermione interrupted him immediately.

“First, Harry and Ron didn’t show up on the train and missed the sorting ceremony. Then, all the professors left the welcome feast. Then, when they finally showed up in the common room, you weren’t with them.” She aimed that statement at Regulus.

“Wait,” Regulus said, throwing his hands out to stop her. “Why weren’t you two on the train?” Ron and Harry looked vaguely guilty, though they both had small, dangerous smiles poking through that put Regulus on edge.

“Well, what happened was-” Harry said.

“It made sense at the time-” Ron said.

Both boys began speaking over each other. Regulus waved his hands to bring their attention back to him. They both fell silent immediately and looked at Regulus with equally guilty expressions.

“One at a time please,” Regulus requested. Both of the boys stared at him for a second before Ron gave Harry a knowing look.

What came next was the most insane collection of events Regulus had ever heard. He couldn’t help thinking that if Harry was an accomplished liar, he would definitely be making them up. Unfortunately for all of them, Harry was a terrible liar and was most certainly

telling the truth about his summer. The story about the mysterious house-elf invading his home, showing up in his bedroom to give ominous warnings about something terrible happening at Hogwarts, and confessing that he had been keeping all of Harry's mail from him, before using magic specifically to get Harry in trouble made Regulus's head spin.

"So, wait. What was the name of this elf?" Regulus interrupted when they got to the end of the elf using magic and apparating away.

"Dobby. Do you know him?" Harry asked.

Regulus just barely kept himself from rolling his eyes, *did he know him*, honestly, did Harry think he just knew everyone's house elves? "No, I do not know him, but my house elf might be able to find out. I'll ask him when I get the chance."

"Cool," Harry said with an easy smile like Regulus had just offered to solve all his problems.

"Go on," Regulus prompted.

"Well, the Dursleys didn't want me to go back to school, but Ron, Fred, and George came to pick me up," Harry said. Ron interrupted him before he could go on.

"Didn't want you to go back to school? Harry, there were bars on your window," Ron said indignantly. A flush crept up Harry's face and Regulus wondered if Harry knew that Ron had already shared this piece of information with Regulus.

"That's absurd. Did they think that Dumbledore would just let you stay home with them?" Regulus asked. Harry shrugged helplessly. Regulus noticed that Hermione had an uncomfortable look on her face and he wondered what the girl was thinking.

"Honestly Harry, they were starving you!" Ron yelled as if he couldn't believe how passive Harry was being about the whole thing.

"They were what?" Regulus asked fiercely. Harry looked at him nervously, like Regulus was about to start starving him as well if he got too upset by how Harry's relatives were treating him.

"Anyways," Harry said, clearly trying to move on from the uncomfortable topic. Regulus glared at him, but Harry looked away and jumped back into his explanation of what had happened. He explained his mishap using the floo network and witnessing Lucius and Draco Malfoy in Borgin and Burkes before Ron jumped in to explain the altercation his father had with Lucius Malfoy.

"It was so wicked," Ron said. "Malfoy's dad was being a prat and he was insulting Hermione's parents, 'cause they're muggles, you know?" Like Regulus could have forgotten that fact.

"Then my dad threw a punch," Ron said as he started mimicking the battle he was describing. Harry laughed loudly and Hermione looked vaguely disapproving, though he could see the corners of her lips twitching like she was trying to hold in a smile.

“Hagrid had to pull them apart,” Harry added through a cheerful laugh. Regulus felt sorry to have missed it. Though he felt indifferent to Draco, he had always disliked Lucius and he would have enjoyed watching him brawl like a muggle in the middle of Diagon Alley.

“So, why weren’t you on the train?” Regulus asked after a moment. The guilty expressions were back and Regulus immediately wanted to roll his eyes again. Sometimes he wondered if they could tell he was older than he appeared, the way they told him things like he was the only adult in the room. Harry quickly explained the blocked entrance to the platform, and how he and Ron were left stranded with Ron’s parents on the otherside of the passageway. Regulus felt a trickle of worry. It would take extremely powerful magic to block something like that.

“Why did you not wait for someone to come and get you?” Regulus asked. Hermione crossed her arms, her face clearly showing the vindication she felt at Regulus’s question. Both boys looked very discomfited, and Hermione looked like she was about to launch into a tirade so Regulus indicated for Harry to keep going.

Harry then explained their poorly planned trip to Hogwarts involving stealing an illegally modified car and encountering a furious Whomping Willow. Regulus knew how dangerous the tree could be, remembering the multiple students who were injured trying to run around out, not to mention Snape’s conspiracy theory about what lay underneath it. Regulus couldn’t remember what he actually claimed though, Snape was never someone Regulus paid much attention to.

There was no doubt that Harry was his father’s son. He wondered if it was something in his blood that made him so impulsive and reckless. He couldn’t help but think that James and Sirius would have loved to know Harry. He imagined them watching Harry crash a flying car into a violently thrashing tree. Sirius would probably howl with laughter. James would look worried, but he would no doubt have a glint of pride and humor in his eyes.

Lily would probably be horrified. Though Regulus never knew her very well, he couldn’t imagine that she would enjoy hearing about the extreme danger her son put himself in. Then again, she did marry James. For all he knew, she was just the same. The thought of them all made Regulus’s chest ache painfully.

“I’m surprised you weren’t expelled,” Regulus said, trying to give Harry a sharp, disapproving look. He wasn’t sure he succeeded.

“Me too,” Ron agreed joyfully, sobering up when he noticed Hermione’s disapproving look.

“You should have been,” Hermione said. “Can you imagine any other student getting away with what you did? You broke the law!” She was edging into hysteria.

“So, what? You wanted us to be expelled?” Ron asked, exasperated. Clearly, they had already had this conversation several times despite the short amount of time that had passed.

“No, of course not,” Hermione said with false patience, “I’m just saying that...”

“Tell us what happened to you,” Harry said quickly, interrupting whatever Hermione was about to say. Regulus was almost thankful for it, whenever he pictured Ron and Harry in such danger, he felt vaguely dizzy. However, this change of subject also meant that now all three of them would expect a real explanation for where he had been.

“Oh, well, I just came down with a slight cold. My mother wouldn’t let me write anyone so I wasn’t able to tell you before the Diagon Alley trip,” Regulus said.

“You weren't allowed to write at all because you had a *cold*?” Harry asked incredulously.

“It was a very intense cold,” Regulus offered. Harry looked worried, but Hermione looked suspicious.

“Why did she decide to bring you back now?” Ron asked. “I mean, no offense mate, but you still look pretty sick.”

“Ronald,” Hermione chastised.

“That’s okay, I know,” Regulus said easily, though he hadn’t actually looked in the mirror since before the ritual and had no idea how he looked. “She just figured it would be better for me to heal at Hogwarts.”

“When can you leave?” Harry asked. Regulus noticed for the first time that his shoulders were set with anxiety and had been since he walked in the door.

“Let me ask, I’m sure I can leave soon,” Regulus answered, though he was unsure. It turned out he was right. Madam Pomfrey told him to take the potion she had left for him the night before and to come back if he started feeling weak or unwell again before sending him off.

Regulus left with the other three soon after that and headed back to the Gryffindor tower to change. He was relieved to see his trunk had already been sent up. They still had a few days before classes started so Regulus planned to spend the morning reading through his school books and doing the homework that he should have been doing the entire summer. However, he felt very worried the moment he entered the common room.

He vaguely registered the whispered hissing getting louder as he walked, but the moment the portrait hole opened, Regulus felt a cold sweat break out across his skin. The hissing was louder than he had ever heard it. The noise wiggled under his skin and made a home in his veins. He stumbled and nearly fell to the ground. Harry and Ron caught him easily and kept him on his feet.

“Maybe you should go back to the Hospital Wing,” Hermione suggested worriedly. Regulus shook his head.

“No, no, I’m fine,” he replied. None of them looked convinced. He looked around the room and was relieved that there were only a few students. Some older fifth-years that Regulus vaguely recognized and a first-year with bright red hair. She didn’t even look at him, her eyes were glued to Harry.

“All right, Ginny?” Ron said. “Oh, Regulus, this is my sister.”

“Hello,” Regulus greeted. Ginny gave him a polite smile, before turning back to what she was doing. Regulus wondered if she was already working on classwork as he watched her write in a leather book.

He finally felt well enough to walk and quickly made his way up to the dorm room. The hissing subsided slightly, but it was still much more intense than it had been in the Hospital Wing. He opened his trunk and dug around in it, trying to find the locket that was no doubt making the noise, but he found nothing.

Eventually, he gave up and just collected some clothes and headed to the bathroom. When he looked in the mirror for the first time, Regulus flinched. He looked almost like he had right before he went to the cave with Kreacher, though of course much younger. His skin was sunken, there were dark circles under his eyes, and he was pale and sickly looking. He spent far too much time poking around at his face before shaking himself and jumping in the shower.

The day was easy after that, though the hissing seemed to follow him around the castle. Hermione was kind enough to help him with his work, while Ron and Harry worked idly next to them. Or at least pretended to work, he thought. He was relieved to see that he wasn’t the only one not finished and that the library was full of other students frantically working on classwork. At one point, he left the others and found a tucked-away alcove, giving a quick excuse about looking for a specific book in the back of the library and casting a quick Notice-Me-Not so he wouldn’t draw attention.

“Kreacher,” he called. Kreacher popped into existence in front of him.

“Master Regulus,” Kreacher greeted with a low bow.

“Did you remove the locket from the drawing room?” Regulus whispered furiously. His voice sounded odd, paranoid, and unhinged.

“No, Master Regulus,” Kreacher said, giving Regulus a peculiar look. “The locket is still where you left it.”

“Okay,” Regulus said, suddenly feeling off balance. He was lost in thought about the hissing noise for a moment before Kreacher spoke again.

“Was that all, Master?” Regulus suddenly remembered the other piece of information that he needed from his elf.

“Do you know a house elf named Dobby?” Regulus asked.

“No, Master Regulus. Kreacher does not know Dobby,” Kreacher answered. “Kreacher does not know many other house elves.” Regulus wondered if he was sad about that, it was hard to tell by the inclination in Kreacher’s voice or lack thereof.

“Could you find out who he is? And what family he works for?” Regulus asked.

“Kreacher can try,” Kreacher said uncertainly.

“Thank you, Kreacher. Tell me if you discover this information. That will be all.” Kreacher bowed deeply again and disappeared. Regulus walked back to the library in a daze. The locket wasn’t here, it was still at Grimmauld. So why was he still hearing it?

the chamber of secrets.

Second year was just as easy as first year had been. This wasn't surprising considering Regulus was a fully grown wizard studying with a bunch of twelve-year-olds, but it was still relieving. Regulus didn't think he had the capability to give any more than the bare minimum. His energy still hadn't fully returned since his misguided attempt to complete the Breiða Sjáflr ritual.

He still felt exhausted. Every night he slept like a log, never dreaming or moving once he laid down. During the day, he felt cold and drained. Madam Pomfrey had given him a few vials of Pepperup Potion but she was worried about how his body would react to too much of it and stopped giving it to him after only a few weeks.

The hissing never seemed to leave him. It sounded like a permanent snake was living on Regulus's shoulder. He was sure he was going insane, but he wasn't sure what to do about it. He wasn't ready to tell Dumbledore about the Horcrux, but he wasn't sure that he would have much of a choice if things carried on as they had been.

Regulus was disturbed to hear about the new Defense against the Dark Arts professor, a man named Gilderoy Lockhart. It wasn't until he was reading through one of the man's insane books that he realized he'd met him before. Lockhart had been at school with Regulus the first time around. He was three years younger than Regulus and was sorted into Ravenclaw so the two of them never crossed paths, but he did distinctly remember a small third-year bragging about fighting off the Whomping Willow one night at dinner.

Lockhart had clearly zeroed in on Harry. "Gave you a taste for publicity, didn't I?" Regulus overheard Lockhart say when they were heading to Herbology. "Gave you the bug. You got on the front page of the paper with me and you couldn't wait to do it again."

Regulus listened to Lockhart as he gave Harry 'advice' on how to be famous. It was the most second-hand embarrassment Regulus had ever felt for anyone. Listening to Lockhart refer to Harry's level of fame by saying 'a few people have heard of you' made Regulus outwardly cringe.

"What was he talking about?" Regulus asked Harry after Herbology was over. Harry looked at him confused. "Lockhart, he mentioned getting on the front page of the paper." Harry looked so embarrassed that Regulus thought he might just make a run for it.

"It's not a big deal," Harry mumbled quickly. Regulus continued to watch him stoically, a trick that used to work on both James and Sirius. "Well, it was at Diagon," Harry said, launching into the explanation of Lockhart pulling him into a picture with him when he spotted him in the bookstore. Regulus had missed all the copies of the Prophet while he was unconscious for a week, but he made a mental note to have Kreacher bring him that specific version.

"You really need to learn how to say no to people, Harry," Regulus said. Harry looked mildly offended, but Regulus only laughed.

In Transfiguration, Regulus finally noticed Ron's broken wand. He had reattached it with some Spellotape that he borrowed from another student, but it was clear that the item was broken beyond repair. It kept releasing odd sounds and smells whenever Ron tried to use it. Regulus felt terrible for Ron but wasn't sure how to help him. It wasn't like he could sneak him out of school to take him all the way to Diagon Alley to get a new one. Unless... no, that was not the kind of behavior Regulus was going to follow through on. He had been impulsive enough during the summer, he wasn't about to keep up with that conduct.

On the way to Defense later, Harry was interrupted by a very zealous first-year named Colin Creevey who ask Harry for a signed picture. Naturally, this attracted the attention of none other than Draco Malfoy.

"Everyone line up! Harry Potter's giving out signed photos!" Draco yelled. Harry was furious, angrier than he'd ever seen him. The interaction almost devolved into an outright duel when Draco started taunting Ron. Harry was still just glaring at Draco, his ears flushed red and his fists clenched. Luckily they were interrupted by Lockhart because Regulus wasn't sure Ron's wand could handle casting offensive spells. Not to mention that Harry looked like he was about to abandon magic altogether and tackle Draco to the ground.

Defense against the Dark Arts was just as ridiculous as Regulus suspected it would be. Lockhart gave them a quiz just about his personal life and then let loose a swarm of pixies in the room. Lockhart tried one spell to get them back into their cage after most of the students had run out of the classroom, which of course didn't work, before abandoning them.

"I'll ask you four to just nip the rest of them back into their cage," he said to them. Regulus cast a quick Freezing Charm on the pixies the moment Lockhart was out of sight.

"Can you believe him?" Ron said angrily, grabbing a few pixies out of the air and stuffing them back in the cage.

"He just wants to give us some hands-on experience," Hermione said, a bright blush spreading across her cheeks.

"Honestly, Hermione," Regulus said before he could stop himself, giving her a look to say that he knew exactly why she was making excuses for the man. Hermione's face grew even redder.

"He doesn't know what he's doing," Harry said.

"He couldn't even cast one spell," Regulus argued.

"Look at all the things he's done in his books," Hermione argued.

"He says he's done," Ron said and Regulus was inclined to agree.

Harry had Quidditch practice early that year, Wood, the Gryffindor Captain already running a tight ship, and Ron and Hermione opted to join him. Regulus stayed behind, hoping to catch a few more hours of sleep. This meant that Regulus had to hear secondhand about their run-in with Draco and the Slytherin Quidditch team. Regulus wasn't surprised to hear about Draco's

father buying his way onto the team, it was exactly the kind of thing Lucius Malfoy would do. Harry was of course furious.

He vaguely listened as they complained about Draco calling Hermione a Mudblood. It was disappointing, but not altogether surprising. It was likely that Draco had heard that word spoken many times growing up, just like Regulus had. Regulus was not about to judge a child for making the same mistakes he had.

Regulus, Ron, and Harry planned a small birthday party for Hermione. Ron and Harry gave her a collection of candy that they had stored up for themselves having forgotten to get her a gift until Regulus mentioned it a week before. Regulus gave her one of the old Transfiguration books that he found in the library at Grimmauld. He was surprised to see tears well up in her eyes at the gifts. She gave them each a quick hug, and Regulus had to keep himself from laughing as both Harry and Ron ended up blushing furiously.

After her birthday, the days seemed to pass in a blur. He could barely manage to keep up with his schoolwork in his current state, despite how easy it was to complete. He still felt drained from the spell even days and weeks after he completed it. His energy never seemed to fully recover and each time he had to go to class and perform more magic it seemed to drain him even more.

Snape seemed more annoyed than ever, but Regulus continued to ignore the man. He was especially hard on Neville, Regulus noticed. Regulus couldn't help but wonder why. At least his hatred of Harry and Regulus made sense, it couldn't have been easy being reminded of James and Sirius so often, not that that was an excuse for Snape acting like a child, but still. Neville, on the other hand, should not have been a target for the professor. Regardless, Regulus didn't have the energy to pay attention to him.

He could tell that McGonagall was getting worried as the weeks went on, he would catch her watching him with a pinched expression during class. She held him back once or twice, asking him how he was feeling and if he was doing okay, but he was always vague with his answers. He was a regular visitor of the Hospital Wing and he could tell that Madam Pomfrey was growing more and more worried.

He was surprised when he woke up one morning to discover that it was already Halloween. He had a bad feeling about the holiday. It was already such a difficult day with Regulus trying to fight off the thoughts about James's death and Sirius's betrayal, but more than that, he felt like the hissing had grown tenfold. It was louder than ever and at times he missed what his friends were saying because he couldn't hear them over the noise.

They were asked by Nearly Headless Nick to join them at his Death Day party. Regulus wanted to refuse the invitation, but Harry had already accepted on their behalf before he could do so. Regardless, when it was time to head to the party, Regulus was feeling far too weak to join them.

Halloween was on a Saturday and he did his best to join in the library that morning, but by lunchtime, he felt too sick to read. He waved them off when they offered to take him to the Hospital Wing and ended up curled in his dorm bed by the early afternoon. He charmed his curtains closed and silenced them, hoping to buffer the hissing that he almost constantly

heard. It seemed to be growing louder by the day. The silencing spells only worked slightly, but it was still enough that he was out the moment he closed his eyes.

He didn't wake until mid-morning. His magic had grown weaker as the weeks went on and so by morning, the charms on his bed had worn off. This was clear when there was sudden sunlight streaming through his open curtains when Ron pushed them aside, easily bypassing the locking charms.

"He's still asleep," Ron said, far too loudly. Regulus grumbled.

"Regulus, wake up, we need to talk to you," Harry said. The worry in his voice made Regulus's eyes shoot open.

"What happened?" He asked. Ron and Harry gave each other a loaded look.

"I'll get Hermione," Ron said, before leaving the dorm room. The room was empty except for Harry and Regulus. Regulus watched as Harry gently sat on his bed.

"How are you feeling?" Harry asked. Regulus took stock of how he felt before answering, surprised that he felt rested. The hissing was still there, but it was much quieter than it had been the night before.

"Better," Regulus said and Harry gave him a quick smile. Ron and Hermione came into the dorm a moment later. Hermione looked flustered and worried, her hair messier than usual. Regulus was immediately worried.

"What happened?" He asked again. Their faces were grave, and it instantly put Regulus on edge.

"What do you know about the Chamber of Secrets?" Hermione said loudly.

"Hermione, let me explain first," Harry said quickly. Regulus's thoughts were already at a full sprint. "Last night we were coming back from the Death Day party," Harry began.

"Which was awful by the way," Ron interrupted. "You should be glad you missed it."

"Ron," Hermione chided.

"Anyways, we were on our way back, and I... well," he looked at Ron and Hermione nervously, but they both nodded, "I heard a voice from inside the walls." Regulus felt his eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "It was saying that it was going to kill someone. So we followed the voice and well..."

"It was outside the second-floor girl's bathroom," Hermione took over. "The whole corridor was flooded and written on the wall was 'The Chamber of Secrets Has Been Opened, Enemies of the Heir, Beware.' It was written in blood! And Filch's cat was petrified and hanging underneath the letters," Hermione said, her voice growing frantic.

"What?" Regulus said stupidly, struggling to process everything they were saying. "Okay, wait, tell me about the voice again." Harry looked supremely uncomfortable. "What did it say

exactly?”

“It said ‘rip, tear, kill’ and that it was so hungry for so long and that it smelled blood,” Harry said. His voice had an almost imperceptible shake to it. It was clear that he was trying to put on a brave face, most likely for Hermione and Ron, but it was crumbling in the face of Regulus’s concern.

“Is this the first time you’ve heard this voice?” Regulus asked. Harry paused for a long moment.

“No,” he said. This was clearly news to Ron and Hermione who both looked at him in surprise. “I heard it the night I had detention with Lockhart, but I just thought I was going crazy, so I didn’t mention it.”

“Have you told anyone else?” Regulus asked quickly.

“No, I didn’t think hearing voices was a good sign. I didn’t want Dumbledore or McGonagall to send me to a loony bin,” Harry said sardonically, though there was real worry marring his face.

“Okay, that’s good,” Regulus said, trying to reassure him. It must have worked because Harry’s shoulder’s loosened immediately. “What did the voice sound like?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said and paused to think for a moment, “it was sort of, you know, raspy.”

“Was it a man or a woman speaking?”

“I couldn’t tell,” Harry asked after considering the question for a second.

“Maybe it was Peeves?” Ron suggested. Hermione looked surprised by the suggestion but nodded in agreement after a second.

“Maybe,” Harry conceded. “But it didn’t sound like Peeves usually does.”

“Okay, so you said it led you to this writing on the wall. Tell me the words again,” Regulus said. Hermione repeated them, and Regulus took a moment to mull them over.

“Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?” Hermione asked.

“Not much. It’s a Slytherin legend. Salazar Slytherin didn’t want anyone from non-magical families to study at Hogwarts, so before he left the school he built a secret chamber that stored some kind of monster that would kill all the muggleborns in the school,” Regulus explained. Hermione’s face drained of color and Regulus mentally berated himself. He wasn’t intentionally trying to scare them, just repeating a story he’d heard many times growing up. It was more of a fantastical tale than a horror story when you grew up in a pureblood family like the Blacks.

“It’s real?” Ron asked, a shocked look on his face. Regulus was suddenly reminded of the time he overheard Bellatrix bragging about the Heir of Slytherin and how she knew who it

was. There were rumors that the Chamber had been opened before in the 40s, but Regulus wasn't sure if those were true or if it was just a Death Eater fairy tale. Still, he didn't want to worry the kids needlessly if it was false.

"I'm sure it's just a legend," Regulus reassured. "I mean, if that kind of chamber existed, surely someone would have found it by now. It's probably just some kid playing a prank."

"Probably Malfoy," Harry grumbled. Regulus gave him a look.

"Yeah, remember what he said? 'You'll be next Mudbloods,'" Ron agreed loudly. Regulus flinched at the word. It was a word thrown around so haphazardly when he was growing up. He always overheard his parents and other relatives use it. He didn't even realize it was a bad thing to say until he said the word once when he was thirteen and Sirius hexed him so hard that he could barely walk.

"Did he really say that?" Regulus asked. All three of them nodded their heads.

"But even if it was a prank, how did they manage to petrify Mrs. Norris?" Hermione asked, she didn't look any more relaxed than she did a moment ago. Regulus didn't have an answer to that.

"I'm not sure how to petrify someone," Regulus admitted and Hermione got the look on her face that usually meant she was about to spend far too long researching something. Regulus was relieved though, he didn't like seeing the poor girl scared out of her mind, and if she had a task to focus on then at least she would be distracted.

"Oh," Harry interrupted. "Also, everyone in the school probably thinks we did it." He said it so calmly like he was reminding Regulus about classwork they had due that day and not like they were going to be accused of committing a crime.

"Why?" Regulus asked, sighing tiredly.

"Because they all walked up on us after we discovered the writing, and Filch accused us of attacking Mrs. Norris," Harry said. "Or he accused me," he added uncertainly.

"Great." Regulus rolled his eyes. "Why did he accuse you specifically?"

"Well, I found this Kwikspell thing in his office, I wasn't even sure what it meant, but he told Dumbledore that I knew he was a squib and that's why I attacked him."

"Oh, strange," Regulus said. He'd forgotten that Filch was a squib. It was always a nasty rumor that Slytherin kids talked and laughed about, but Regulus didn't believe them until James confirmed it for him.

"What's a squib anyways?" Harry asked.

"It's someone from a magical family who is born without magic," Ron explained. "Most families just kill them."

"What?" Hermione squawked. Regulus gave a light chuckle.

“That is a total myth,” Regulus said. “Even my family has a few squibs and if any family was going to be that crazy, it would be mine.” Ron gave him an embarrassed look. Harry and Hermione looked equally horrified. “It is typically not the kind of information that's spread around though,” Regulus conceded.

“So Filch thinks I hate him because he’s a squib?” Harry asked. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Yes, it is,” Regulus said, “but it’s probably not uncommon for other students to play pranks on him or even attack him if they find out.” Harry looked very guilty all of a sudden like Filch’s mistreatment was somehow his fault.

“I’m going to go to the library, and see if I can find out any more information about the Chamber or petrification,” Hermione said suddenly. She didn’t wait for them to respond before she was out the door.

“Ron,” Regulus said after the door shut. Ron turned to look at him curiously. “Go with her. It’s probably just a legend, but still, if people are going after muggleborns, it's probably best she isn’t left alone.” Ron looked very determined, like a soldier given an important mission, and went to follow her.

“There is something you’re not telling us,” Harry said, a curious look on his face.

“It’s just rumored,” Regulus said. “There is no use sharing it until we know more.” Harry looked vaguely ill. “Will you tell me if you hear the voice again?”

Harry nodded seriously, and Regulus reached out to put a comforting hand on his shoulder. Regulus should have known that this year wouldn’t be a quiet one.

the bludger.

Harry was right when he said that everyone thought it was him, Ron, and Hermione who had written the words. It was clear that everyone was watching them closely, some of them with sneers on their faces. People were especially suspicious of Harry. It surprised Regulus that the other students would be so willing to turn against Harry, but he supposed they all had their own ideas about who Harry was and how he should act.

Regulus was asked by more than one person where he was that night since he, like the other three, was mysteriously missing from the Halloween feast. McGonagall even kept him after class one day.

“How have you been feeling Regulus?” She asked. He was surprised to hear her use his first name. He wasn’t sure that he’d heard anyone else be called by their first name by the professor. He wondered how pitiful he must be looking to garner such a response from her.

“Better actually,” he said honestly, though it was clear she didn’t quite believe him. He knew he was still sickly pale and generally unwell looking, but he at least was feeling better. Since Halloween, he had felt almost like he was on the mend, his energy levels improving slightly. The hissing was still there, but it wasn’t as overwhelming as it had once been.

“I’m afraid I must ask,” she began, pausing slightly as if to fortify herself, “Where were you on Halloween night?”

“Oh, I figured Harry, Ron, and Hermione must have told you,” Regulus said. “I was very ill. I think I slept the entire night.” McGonagall looked relieved by the explanation.

“I only wondered since you were not at the feast,” she explained.

“I understand,” Regulus replied. “I was going to go to the Hospital Wing, but ended up back in the dorm and didn’t wake up until the following morning.” She seemed to accept this, but there was still a twinge of worry to her gaze whenever she looked at him.

She wasn’t the last person to ask, but it seemed that most people were unwilling to accuse him for some reason. When he mentioned this offhandedly to Hermione, she looked at him like he was missing something that should have been painfully obvious. Many students were highly disturbed by what had happened, although Draco and his friends seemed to be enjoying the other students’ nervousness. Ron’s little sister seemed particularly traumatized. Ron told them it was just because she was a big fan of cats.

Lockhart was more nervous after his first class and the issue with the loose pixies, so luckily they didn’t have to face any other live creatures. However, this meant that the class was completely replaced with Lockhart reading sections of his books and making Harry help him reenact random scenes.

In one class, he dragged Harry up to the front of the class and made him howl like a werewolf while Lockhart told an outlandish story about changing a werewolf back into a human by

using the Homorphus Charm. Regulus only barely kept himself from laughing out loud at Harry's disturbed face as he was once again forced to act like a monster.

During History of Magic class, shortly after Halloween, Hermione asked Binns about the Chamber of Secrets but he was no more helpful than Regulus had been. "It is a myth! It does not exist!" Professor Binns had yelled at them. Regulus wasn't so sure though. It was clear even the boring, ghostly teacher was unsettled.

"Honestly, the Sorting Hat had tried to put me in Slytherin, I'd have got the train straight back home," Ron complained after class. Hermione agreed with him but Harry got a look on his face as if he'd just tasted something sour.

"Just because Salazar Slytherin was an awful person, doesn't mean that everyone in Slytherin house is," Regulus argued. "There are lots of good Slytherins."

"Oh, really? Name one," Ron challenged. Regulus rolled his eyes at him.

"I don't know, Ron," Regulus said tiredly. Ron looked vindicated, and Regulus just couldn't let it go. It was clear that Harry was still uncomfortable and Regulus couldn't help the urge to protect him where he could. "But my father was in Gryffindor and he turned out to be a stupid coward, so it's not like the houses are a perfect metric for what a person is like."

The words seemed to have an effect on all three of them. Ron looked unsure, Hermione looked suspicious, a typical occurrence for her recently, and Harry just looked sad, like the fact that Sirius was a traitorous prick was something to be mourned. Perhaps it was, Regulus thought, but he'd spent far too long hating his brother to take it back now.

After class, they ended up back on the second floor and discovered scorch marks near where the words were written. Or more specifically, Harry discovered them after getting on his hands and knees to crawl down the corridor searching for clues.

"This is funny," Hermione said, pointing to a bunch of spiders walking in a straight line. It was a bizarre collection of things to find, but it was still largely unhelpful. They ended up in the girl's bathroom after Hermione explained that no one ever went in there, pushing past the OUT OF ORDER sign on the door. Regulus vaguely remembered it from his first life.

Regulus did not have many friends during his first life. Most of the other Slytherins were just annoying purists, like Snape or Mulciber. He had an ill-fated friendship with Barty of course, and Evan Rosier by association, but he would hardly consider them friends in the way Harry, Ron, and Hermione were friends. However, there was one student who seemed insistent on spending time with him. Pandora Burke, or Pandora Lovegood as she would become just before she graduated, running off into the forest to marry Xenophilius Lovegood on the night of the new moon.

Regulus never understood why Pandora spent time with him. He was never very pleasant to be around in those days, and Pandora was far too nice to be friends with a Death Eater. She would often find him alone in the library or around the grounds and would sit wordlessly beside him. Sometimes she would talk to him, but mostly she was just around. As if she knew the Regulus was drowning in constant loneliness. Despite his confusion about why she

insisted on spending time with him, her friendship was incredibly comforting when Regulus felt like he had no one else to turn to. It was her that originally told him about Moaning Myrtle. Though Regulus never went to speak to the ghost himself, he remembered Pandora mentioned her friendship with the whiny girl.

Hermione and Myrtle were in an argument before the door even fully closed, and Regulus was on the brink of leaving the bathroom the moment he heard it. This plan was ruined when Myrtle suddenly turned her eyes on him.

“Who are you?” She asked in a simpering voice.

“Regulus,” he responded when he realized she was speaking to him.

“I knew a Regulus once,” she said, drawing closer to him.

“Oh, did you?” He said, taking a small step back. He could see the other three watching the interaction very closely.

“Was he your father?” She asked. Regulus felt extremely uncomfortable. “Well?” She prompted when he didn’t respond.

“No, he wasn’t,” he admitted. Sometimes he wished he had just chosen himself as his fake father, but it would have created so many complications given Sirius’s reinstatement as the heir to the family. Regulus needed access to the Black vaults and the bastard son of the disregarded, dead heir wasn’t guaranteed access the way Sirius’s bastard would. He couldn’t risk other members of the Black family coming out of the woodwork to question his existence. Especially considering the fact that Sirius seemed way more the type to father a random child than Regulus would.

“Strange,” she said, now circling around him. “You look just like him.” Hermione got an odd look on her face that Regulus did not appreciate.

“Sirius Black is my father,” Regulus explained quickly. It was unavoidable that he looked like his old self, but he’d been trying to be careful about masking his appearance. His hair now grew down past his ears, far longer than he ever wore it as a twelve-year-old, but it was clear that some people still recognized him.

“Oh, Sirius.” She practically giggled at the name. Regulus rolled his eyes. Of course, Myrtle would have that reaction to hearing Sirius’s name. “He was such a flirt.” Ron let out an uncomfortable laugh. “I always heard girls gossiping about him.”

“I bet you did,” Regulus mumbled.

“What does that mean?” Harry asked. “That he was a flirt.” Ron gave him a funny look. Ron had five older brothers, so it wasn’t a surprise that he understood what Myrtle meant immediately. It made Regulus wonder how sheltered Harry had been.

“It means he was, you know, he was,” Ron said, fumbling over his words, “*with* a lot of girls.”

“Doing what?” Harry said.

“Oh, honestly Ron,” Hermione said at the same time.

“But it was so strange,” Myrtle interrupted. Oh no, Regulus thought. “You know, ghosts can go invisible when we want to. I used to follow him around...”

Regulus desperately wanted out of this conversation. He did not want to hear about his traitor brother’s teenage conquests.

“And not once did I see him do anything except kiss those girls,” she continued. “Strange that they always claimed he did more, don’t you think?” Regulus did not understand what she was getting at, nor did he care to examine it, but was saved from answering when the door slammed open.

“RON!” Percy stood in the doorway and quickly shooed them out of the girl’s bathroom a moment later. Regulus was thankful for the reprieve. He listened to the three of them try to figure out who the Heir of Slytherin might be, but he was too lost in thought to respond. Why would Myrtle take such an interest in Sirius’s sex life? Beyond her general perverted tendencies, he supposed.

The day before the Quidditch game, Kreacher popped into the empty dorm room when Regulus was finally left alone.

“Master Regulus,” Kreacher greeted with grave formality. Regulus was suddenly reminded of the time when he begged Kreacher to stop bowing before him every time they were alone in a room and how his mother had viciously punished them both when she found out.

“Yes, Kreacher,” Regulus said smoothly, prompting him to continue.

“Kreacher has discovered who Dobby’s family is,” Kreacher said.

“Go on,” Regulus said.

“Dobby works for the Malfoy family, Master.” This was not what Regulus had been expecting.

“Are you sure?” Regulus asked.

Kreacher nodded. “Kreacher is sure.”

“Okay,” Regulus said. “Okay, thank you, Kreacher.”

“Will that be all, Master Regulus?” Regulus almost dismissed him before remembering something he needed to do with Dobby.

“Kreacher, Dobby stole a gift for Harry that we sent this summer. His new clothing. I need you to get it back from him. Just put it in Harry’s trunk if you can manage it.”

Kreacher left soon after that but Regulus hardly noticed him leave. Why would the Malfoy family elf be targeting Harry? It must be Draco. Regulus couldn't think of a reason that Lucius would send his house elf to torment the boy, especially in such odd ways. He thought back to the vague warning Dobby had given Harry and wondered if Draco knew about the Chamber of Secrets incident. He didn't agree with the others, that Draco might be the Heir, he was pretty sure that if the Malfoy family was descended from Salazar Slytherin that all the Death Eaters would know because they would never shut up about it. But maybe it was Draco who was pulling the prank?

Regulus was so lost in thought that he barely noticed the increased sound of hissing echoing in his ears. By the time the Quidditch game came around the next day, the noise was so loud that Regulus was desperate for a small reprieve. He felt weaker and weaker as the morning passed, and by the time he was in the Gryffindor stands, Regulus was barely managing to stay upright. Hermione gave him a worried look but he waved her off, deciding to head to the Hospital Wing once the game was over.

Of course, this plan was interrupted when Harry was tagged by a rogue bludger during the game and ended up with his bones vanished by Lockhart. It all happened so quickly that Regulus could barely believe it, but he watched as Lockhart bent back the empty muscle of Harry's arm and nearly vomited at the sight. Colin Creevey, disturbingly, tried to snap a few photos of the damaged limb.

Regulus followed them inside, but he didn't make it to the Hospital Wing. He fell behind the others, struggling to walk with the pain he was feeling in his chest. He thought he heard Hermione asking if he was okay, but the hissing was so loud that he could barely hear her. He tried to wave her off, but she ignored him.

"Come on, let's head to the Hospital Wing," she whispered. "I'll help you."

"Just take me to the common room," Regulus said. "Please." Regulus wasn't sure that Madam Pomfrey would be able to help him without him telling her about the strange ritual he'd tried over the summer. She seemed unsure, but eventually conceded, grabbing onto his arm and helping him walk to Gryffindor Tower.

He was just thankful that he made it to his bed before he collapsed. However, unlike last time, he couldn't sleep. Each time he closed his eyes he felt the pain swirl in his head. He lay there with the curtains closed listening as his dorm mates came back from the excitement of the game and eventually, much later in the evening, settled into bed. Several hours after sunset, the hissing escalated to a point where Regulus thought he might go deaf. Eventually, he struggled until he was standing and decided to head to the Hospital Wing.

When he reached the common room, he sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs in front of the fire. He was already drained and walking was causing his vision to swim dangerously. He decided just to take a break until he felt up to moving before leaving the common room.

He was only there for a few minutes when he noticed Ginny Weasley walk into the common room. She looked wrecked. Her clothes were wet and her hair was disheveled. Her eyes were oddly empty, like someone under the Imperius Curse. Regulus watched her quietly as she walked to one of the tables by the far windows. She didn't seem to notice him. She was

carrying her leather notebook and he watched as she set it down on the table before she sat and rested her head down.

He wasn't sure what made him do it, but he felt himself stand up. He couldn't hear a single noise outside of the hissing in his ear. It was loud and furious like it was spitting in anger. It grew to an impossible level as he approached the table. He watched her take several deep breaths, seemingly asleep, and before either of them could react, he snatched the book from the table and sprinted back to the dorm.

the diary.

Regulus couldn't explain why he stole the notebook from Ginny. Even years later when he looked back, he would struggle to articulate why he'd done it. But that night, with the notebook clutched in his hands, he felt the constant noise in his head settle down into a low buzz. It was still there, the hissing still constant and persistent, but it stopped overpowering him the moment he touched the notebook. He placed it under his pillow and fell into a deep sleep.

The next day, he woke up to find that he was cradling the notebook against his chest. After he dressed for the day, he tucked the notebook into his cloak, so that he could constantly feel it against his body. Maybe all this was why it took him far too long to realize that the school was in chaos. Apparently overnight, the first year Colin Creevey was attacked and petrified while he was trying to sneak up to the Hospital Wing to visit Harry.

Regulus followed Hermione and Ron into the girls' bathroom shortly after they left the common room. "What are we doing in here?" Regulus asked. He thought they were heading to the Hospital Wing to visit Harry, but apparently, he was not paying close enough attention.

"We need a place to make the Polyjuice Potion," Hermione explained. "You agreed to help us make it, remember?"

Regulus did not in fact remember that, but he nodded along regardless. He forgot about their insane plan to illegally brew Polyjuice Potion, so they could disguise themselves and enter the Slytherin common room to figure out who the Heir was. He wanted to protest, but he was pretty sure that they would go ahead with their plans regardless of if he agreed to help or not, and he wasn't about to let a bunch of twelve-year-olds, or thirteen in Hermione's case, make a NEWT level potion on their own. The least he could do was make sure it was made correctly enough that they would all survive their night of hijinks.

Harry joined them shortly after they had begun making the potion.

"It's me," Harry said as he walked in.

"Harry!" Hermione yelled. "How's your arm?"

"Fine," Harry answered quickly. Harry started telling them about Colin before Ron and Hermione interrupted him to tell him they already knew.

"There's something else," Harry said after Ron started complaining about Draco again. "Dobby came to visit me in the middle of the night."

"What?" Regulus asked, alarmed. He filled them in on what Dobby had told him as quickly as he could get the words out.

Regulus was shocked to learn that Dobby had once again shown up the night before. It was difficult to believe that Dobby, the house elf set on maiming or potentially killing Harry

Potter, belonged to the Malfoy family. Regulus couldn't figure out what motive the Malfoys would have for sending their house elf after Harry, especially considering he was doing such a terrible job of removing the boy from school. Of course, the others already believed that Draco was the Heir, which Regulus still felt was unlikely, but the connection of Dobby to Draco would certainly not help prove Draco's innocence. Now that a child had been petrified, it seemed dubious that this was only a prank. Either way, Regulus wasn't about to tell them who Dobby belonged to.

"The Chamber of Secrets has been opened before?" Hermione demanded.

"Did he say when it was last opened?" Regulus asked.

"He didn't say," Harry replied. "I don't think he was supposed to. He started punishing himself right after he let it slip." Harry looked disconcerted by this fact.

"He started punishing himself?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"It's common for house elves to punish themselves when they disobey their masters," Regulus explained.

"That's barbaric!" Hermione shouted. Regulus nodded, he didn't exactly disagree with her, he had witnessed Kreacher punish himself enough times to understand how awful it was, but he knew how commonplace it was.

"Lucius Malfoy must have been the last one to open it," Ron said.

"I don't think so," Regulus said. He hadn't intended on sharing this tidbit of information, but seeing as they were already on the track to figure it out, he figured it couldn't hurt. "I remember hearing rumors that it was opened almost fifty years ago now. If that's the case, then Lucius would have been too young to open it."

"Where did you hear this?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"It's a common Slytherin legend like I said," Regulus answered, aiming for nonchalance. Hermione didn't look assuaged.

"Were your parents Slytherins?" She asked.

"No," Regulus said. "I already told you that my father was a Gryffindor and my mother didn't go to Hogwarts."

"Beauxbatons then?" Regulus often forgot how much time Hermione spent reading about the wizarding world. He nodded vaguely. Hermione gave him a keen look.

"Who do you think opened it last time?" Ron interrupted their discussion.

"I don't know," Regulus answered honestly.

"Dumbledore said something odd last night," Harry said. "He said it wasn't a question of who, but how."

“What does that mean?” Hermione asked.

“No idea,” Harry replied with a shrug. They seemed to be at another dead end, but Hermione had a look on her face like she had a new trail to follow. Ron looked more determined than ever, no doubt still focused on Draco. Harry just looked worried and vaguely annoyed. Regulus for his part was having trouble caring about the Chamber of Secrets at all. He kept brushing his hand against the notebook tucked away, reminding himself it was there throughout the entire conversation.

Regulus spent more time away from the trio after the discovery of Colin Creevey, though it wasn't completely intentional. It was clear that the school was on edge, everyone wondering who might be next. Neville Longbottom was particularly nervous, though Regulus didn't think a pureblood had anything to worry about.

One of the few nights that Regulus was not alone was because Harry specifically sought him out while Regulus was tucked away in the dorm room by himself.

“Hey,” Harry said awkwardly. He was standing in the center of the room while Regulus leaned against the window looking out at the grounds.

“Yeah?” Regulus asked. Harry twisted his hands together, looking uncomfortable for a moment.

“Why did you... I just wanted to say thank you,” Harry said.

“Oh,” Regulus said, turning fully to face Harry. “For what?”

“For the clothes,” Harry mumbled, looking away unconsciously.

“Ah, of course,” Regulus said quietly. “I meant to give them to you for your birthday, but of course, Dobby stole them so I wasn't able to,” Regulus explained.

“How did you manage to get them back?” Harry asked curiously.

“Kreacher,” Regulus answered and at Harry's confused look, elaborated. “He's my house elf, I asked him to find the package and get it back to you. I wanted to make sure you got it.”

“They seem... really expensive,” Harry said. *They were*, Regulus thought, though he knew better than to say it out loud. “Why did you buy them for me?” Regulus gave him a long look before answering.

“Harry, did your parents not leave you any money?” Regulus asked bluntly.

“No, they did. I just don't usually go clothes shopping,” Harry said defensively. Regulus breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that James would have left anything he owned to his son,

but he was worried that Harry's muggle relatives were taking the money and keeping it for themselves. At least he had access to the funds.

"Well, I do like to buy clothes," Regulus said simply. "And I may have noticed that you only ever wore your Hogwarts uniforms, even on weekends," he added quietly. Harry flushed harshly. "It's okay, I just wanted you to have some other options, if you didn't want to wear those things." He hated how embarrassed Harry felt. It made his heart clench painfully in his chest.

"Thank you," Harry said so softly that Regulus almost missed it. His eyes looked suspiciously misty, so Regulus looked away to give him some privacy.

He was pleased to see that Harry wore the clothing he gave him more often. Hermione even commented on it once or twice, but when she noticed how uncomfortable Harry got about it she let it go. Ron didn't seem to notice, which Regulus thought was for the best.

Other than those few interactions, Regulus was alone and the main reason for that was the mysterious notebook he had stolen. It had a draw to him that he couldn't understand. He felt possessive over it, worried about where it was when he wasn't actively holding it, and would spend hours flipping through the blank pages.

It took him a full week with the notebook before he decided to write in it. The only thing he noticed about it was some smudged writing on the first page that read *T. M. Riddle*. Regulus tried to look for that name in the library, but couldn't find any reference to it. He wondered if it really was just a blank notebook because there was something about it that drew Regulus in. One night, after everyone had gone to bed, Regulus walked down into the common room and pulled out the notebook.

Carefully he wrote, "Who is T. M. Riddle?" at the top of the page. He wondered if he should risk calling Kreacher again to see if the house elf knew anything about that name. It sounded like a muggle name, so it was unlikely that whomever T. M. Riddle was that he was a pureblood. Regulus was so distracted by his thoughts that he almost missed his writing fading into the page.

"Who am I speaking to?" The writing appeared below where his words just disappeared. It was nice handwriting, but not the same as you would see for someone with years of calligraphy training that most purebloods received.

"I asked you first," Regulus wrote. He wasn't aware of any kind of journal that would respond to someone's writing.

"My name is Tom. This is my diary."

"Tom? Tom M. Riddle?" Regulus asked.

"Yes. Who are you? You are not Ginny Weasley." That sent an odd prickle down Regulus's spine. Why was the journal referencing Ginny?

"My name is Regulus," he wrote.

“What an interesting name. What is your last name Regulus?”

“Black,” Regulus answered, though there was something telling him the journal already knew. It was well known in the wizarding world that the Blacks used astronomical objects and constellations to name their children.

“I knew a Black once,” Tom wrote, though he did not elaborate right away.

“What are you exactly?” Regulus asked. “How is your diary writing back to me? Are you trapped?”

“In a way, I am trapped. I am a memory from my time at Hogwarts.”

“When was your time at Hogwarts?”

“Many years ago now, at least for you. I began attending Hogwarts in 1938.” Regulus thought about his parents, or his ‘grandparents’ now that he was Regulus Black III. They must have been the Blacks that Tom Riddle knew. He wondered if his mother’s painting at Grimmauld would have any memories of the Chamber of Secrets.

“Why were you talking to Ginny?” Regulus asked. He wanted to ask about the Chamber of Secrets, but he didn’t want to come right out and say it. He was being impulsive enough as it was considering his recent actions.

“Ginny Weasley was talking to me,” Tom said, though Regulus felt like the clarification was mostly unnecessary. *“She was quite lonely when she started school, despite her siblings.”* Tom’s words put Regulus on edge, though he couldn’t put his finger on why.

“How did Ginny get your diary?” Regulus asked.

“She said her father bought it for her. It was with her books for school.” It was a non-answer like Tom was avoiding the question.

“How is that possible? Someone was just selling your diary?” Regulus asked.

“I found it confusing myself, but I only know what Ginny told me. How did you obtain my diary?”

“I found it. Ginny must have disposed of it,” Regulus said. He didn’t think telling Tom that he stole the book from Ginny while she was passed out in the Gryffindor common room would go over well.

“You do not have to lie to me, Regulus Black,” Tom’s words appeared. Regulus slammed the book closed. There was a trickle of cold dread working its way down his spine. How could the diary know that he stole it? Or that he was lying? Legilimency perhaps? He didn’t know, but he knew there was something wrong.

“Kreacher,” Regulus called, thankful that the common room was empty this late at night.

“Master Regulus,” Kreacher said as he appeared next to Regulus.

“I need you to speak with my mother’s portrait. Can you do that?”

“Kreacher can speak to Mistress,” he replied, sounding overly pleased with the instruction. Kreacher’s unbreakable love for his mother always made him feel a little unnerved.

“Ask her about a student she went to school with, Tom Riddle, and what she remembers about the Chamber of Secrets,” Regulus commanded. Kreacher nodded so deeply that his long ears brushed the ground, before snapping out of existence.

Regulus wondered how long it would take the elf to speak with Walburga. He also started wondering if the two of them were having conversations when he was away from the house. It seemed unlikely that his mother would waste time conversing with a house elf, but she also seemed unable to leave her portrait frame for whatever reason, and it must grow boring being all alone for so long.

Regulus was about to give up and go to bed when Kreacher appeared next to him again. “Yes, Kreacher?” Regulus said.

“Kreacher has spoken to Mistress,” Kreacher said in his dull, scraggly voice. Regulus nodded for him to continue. “Mistress says that Tom Riddle was a handsome Slytherin boy, friends with Orion while at Hogwarts.”

“That’s all?” Regulus asked and Kreacher nodded. “What about the Chamber of Secrets?”

“Mistress says that a filthy mudblood was killed when the Chamber was opened.” Kreacher gave a nasty smile at that, but Regulus was too distracted to address it. He knew the elf held the same beliefs as the rest of his family, barring Sirius and Andromeda of course, but Regulus didn’t feel like an elf of his age was likely to change anytime soon.

Not that Regulus wanted him to change exactly. He had been too focused on his plan to protect James’s son that he hadn’t spent much time thinking about his own beliefs. He spent a large amount of time with Hermione, a muggleborn, a fact that would have scandalized him in his first life, but now it didn’t feel as important. Regardless, he had more pressing things to focus on.

“Does she know who opened the Chamber? Or who the girl was?” Regulus asked, but Kreacher only shook his head. Regulus wondered if he would be able to get more information out of the portrait himself if he traveled home, but he wasn’t keen on speaking with his mother at that moment.

He dismissed Kreacher and then stared suspiciously at the diary. So Tom Riddle did attend school with his parents, as he thought he did, which meant he definitely was present when the Chamber was last opened. A handsome Slytherin boy wasn’t exactly much to go on, so Regulus felt he had no choice but to continue his conversation with Tom, despite how unsettled it made him feel. He needed to get more information. There was clearly something going on that he was missing.

“Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?” Regulus wrote.

"You're back," was all Tom wrote in reply.

"Yes."

"Are you ready to tell me how you really obtained my diary?" Tom wrote after a moment.

"Will you tell me about the Chamber of Secrets if I do?"

"Perhaps." Tom was no doubt a Slytherin, Regulus thought. The way he withheld information made it clear that he was more cunning than Regulus might have initially thought. Despite being a Slytherin in his first life, Regulus never felt particularly cunning or resourceful. He tried his best to emulate the traits of his house, but he never felt that it came naturally to him like it did to his cousins. Now, as a Gryffindor, he felt even farther out of his depth.

"I stole the diary from Ginny," Regulus finally wrote after a long few minutes. He didn't feel like he had another option but to see the conversation through.

"That was very naughty, Regulus Black." Regulus felt a shiver run down his back. He did not enjoy the way Tom continued to use his full name.

"The Chamber of Secrets?" Regulus prompted.

"Why do you think I would know anything about it?" Of course, he wouldn't offer the answer right away. Regulus felt like he was just being toyed with.

"You went to school with my grandparents," Regulus explained. *"My grandmother, Walburga Black mentioned that she knew you."*

"Why not ask her about the Chamber?"

"She knows nothing, other than that someone died. Do you know anything more?" Regulus was already growing fed up with the conversation, and he was quickly developing a splitting headache.

"I would be happy to tell you what I know about the Chamber of Secrets," Tom wrote. Finally, Regulus thought, though it was short-lived. *"Once you tell me the truth."*

"What truth?" Regulus wrote in reply. He felt vaguely nauseous, like if he moved too quickly he would lose his dinner.

"Walburga Black is your grandmother?" Regulus's headache expanded, and he almost lost vision in one of his eyes.

"Yes," he wrote, his handwriting growing shaky.

"It is wrong to lie, Regulus Black. How do I know I can trust you with what I know if all you do is lie to me?" Regulus cradled his head in his hands on the desk, groaning quietly.

"How do you know I'm lying?" His words were barely legible.

“Who are you really, Regulus?” Despite how much he hated Tom using his full name, the usage of his first name only, like they were having an easy discussion between friends, made him dizzy and uncomfortable. He closed the book and leaned back in the chair. He decided to put the conversation aside for now and come back to it when his head felt clearer. He took the diary and walked quietly up to bed. Despite his odd feeling about Tom, he still stuck the diary carefully under his pillow.

the dueling club.

It took almost a full week for Regulus to feel well enough to even think about the diary again. He felt weak and ill every time he woke up, and though he had enough energy to go to lessons, he didn't have room for much else. Making the Polyjuice Potion also took up a large amount of his time as he had all but taken over the process. Hermione was anxious to help, but Regulus didn't want to risk her getting hurt dealing with the ingredients that could have dangerous side effects. Ron and Harry were generally useless for the brewing process, but Regulus was fine with this. Better they didn't help and stayed safe, rather than putting themselves in unnecessary danger.

Originally, they had planned to collect the ingredients around the school and then steal everything else from Snape's stores, but Regulus just couldn't be bothered. He ordered the ingredients that weren't heavily tracked and had Kreacher obtain the rest. It was nearly December when he finally started thinking about it again. They all seemed shocked when Regulus told them he just asked his mother to order the ingredients for them, but Regulus was too tired to bother coming up with another excuse.

"Your mother didn't wonder why you were ordering Lacewing flies or boomslang skin?" Hermione asked, appalled. Regulus shrugged.

"What if she tells a teacher or something?" Ron asked nervously.

"She's not going to do that," Regulus replied. *Because she doesn't exist*, he thought.

"You didn't need to do that, we could have stolen the ingredients," Hermione argued.

"And risked Snape figuring out that we're brewing this potion? I guarantee that he would realize exactly what we were doing once he found out what was missing," Regulus replied. Thankfully, that seemed to settle the argument, though Hermione still looked put out.

It was nearly December before Regulus thought about the diary, the Chamber of Secrets, or the house elf Dobby again. He debated with himself whether he should approach Draco to see if he was behind Dobby's attacks on Harry, but Regulus didn't think the child had it in him to do something so nefarious and then keep it to himself. How he demanded Harry's attention at all hours of the day made it unlikely that he could hide something like that.

He thought that it might be Lucius behind it, but he couldn't figure out a reason that Lucius would risk openly attacking the Boy Who Lived, especially considering how masterfully he weaseled out of his last conviction. Regulus also wondered if Dobby was perhaps acting against his Master's orders. It wasn't unheard of, and based on Harry's descriptions, he did seem very repentant for causing Harry pain.

It was an odd conundrum that Regulus felt ill-equipped to find an answer to. He was still no closer to figuring out who Tom Riddle was, the name barely existed anywhere, and he still was unwilling to ask Walburga himself. Eventually, he decided that he had no choice but to open the diary again.

“Hello Tom,” Regulus wrote in greeting. His fingers grew cold the moment he started writing, but he did his best to ignore it.

“Regulus Black. Are you ready to tell the truth?” Tom wrote, getting right to the point.

“Yes,” Regulus answered reluctantly. Only Dumbledore knew who he really was, and even he knew very little, but when he weighed the risks, he felt telling Tom Riddle’s diary held a low probability of disseminating that information. “You were right, Walburga Black is not my grandmother. She was my mother.”

“Why did you lie?” The words appeared instantly. Regulus vaguely wondered if Tom Riddle’s memory was bored all alone in the diary.

“No one else knows who I really am. I have to keep it a secret,” Regulus explained.

“Your secret is safe with me. It must be lonely when no one knows who you really are.” Regulus felt like he was being watched, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

“It can be,” Regulus replied honestly. “But there are more important things.”

“And what do you consider important?”

“The Chamber of Secrets?” Regulus wrote, trying to bring them back to the important information.

“The Chamber of Secrets was opened during my seventh year at Hogwarts. I was always interested in it. I was a Slytherin myself, and I spent many years looking for the Chamber to no avail. Once it was opened, there was a string of attacks, students and animals being petrified, before a muggleborn was killed.”

“Was anyone caught for her murder?”

“Yes, a third-year student was expelled, but I don’t know much else about him. After the girl was killed, I abandoned my search for the Chamber, though I have years of notes about my exploration.”

“Will you share them with me?” Regulus asked.

“I would be happy to. Perhaps we could solve the mystery together.” This felt like exactly what Regulus was looking for. Though there was still something off about Tom Riddle. However, Regulus wanted to figure out the location of the Chamber of Secrets more than he wanted to avoid talking to Tom.

“I’ll tell you what I know, if you share what you know,” Regulus wrote, though there was still something else bothering him. “Is this what Ginny was writing to you about?”

“No, though Ginny was worried about the Chamber of Secrets too, despite her pureblood status.”

“What did you talk about?” Regulus had been unendingly curious about what Ginny Weasley was always writing in the diary.

“I cannot tell you that, Regulus Black. You cannot expect me to keep your secrets if I tell you hers.” That was surprisingly more reasonable than Regulus expected the diary to be.

“I understand. Where did you begin your search for the Chamber?”

“I have a question first,” Tom wrote, though it took longer for the words to appear than it usually did.

“What is your question?” Regulus replied.

“Why are you keeping your identity a secret?” Regulus did not feel inclined to share too many details about this topic, but he figured if Tom was going to help him that he could explain it a bit. What would be the harm?

“I am here at Hogwarts to protect Harry Potter.”

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Dueling Club with Lockhart was as ridiculous as Regulus thought it would be. Gilderoy Lockhart was amazingly incompetent. He seemed to mess up even the simplest of spells. So the fact that he was very confidently offering dueling lessons almost made Regulus laugh. But Regulus could hardly enjoy it, he was especially tired that day and had been growing more and more exhausted as winter covered the castle.

He hadn't shared very much about his past with Tom, but his mission to protect Harry Potter seemed to convince Tom to help him and now the two of them were in almost daily contact. Tom was giving him notes on different places in the castle that may have been connected to the Chamber of Secrets, and Regulus was searching each of them. It felt like a fruitless hunt, but it was more than he had done before he started talking to Tom. He once again considered reaching out to Dumbledore, but he didn't feel like he had enough information to bring to the man yet. Regardless, all of his late nights searching the castle were beginning to wear on him and he was struggling to pay attention to the dueling lessons - if one could even call them that.

Snape had always been a proficient dueler, it was one of the reasons he was so sought after by the Death Eaters despite his half-blood status. Regulus remembers watching multiple Death Eaters challenge Snape to a sparring match, and each time Snape came out on top.

“Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape,” Lockhart said cheerfully, ignoring the black glare that Snape was shooting at him. “He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with the short demonstration before we begin.” Regulus let out an undignified snort of laughter before he could stop himself.

Hermione gave him a horrified look, though Ron and Harry both looked like they were trying to hold back laughter themselves. Snape glared at him fiercely, but Regulus just looked away.

“Do you think he’s all right?” Hermione asked after Snape hit Lockhart with an *Expelliarmus* so powerful that Lockhart went flying backward.

“Who cares?” Harry and Ron both said at the same time, Regulus chuckled and Hermione glared at him.

After that, Lockhart dismissed them to practice dueling in pairs. Ron and Harry tried to pair up, while Regulus and Hermione faced each other.

“Time to split up the dream team, I think,” Snape sneered. When Lockhart and Snape decided to pit Draco and Harry against each other, Regulus’s eyes almost rolled out of his skull. Harry looked more determined than he did when he attacked the Dark Lord.

Ron was paired with Seamus, Hermione with Millicent Bulstrode, a large Slytherin girl, and Regulus was paired with a bored-looking Slytherin boy named Theo Nott. Regulus had vaguely known Nott’s father, he was Death Eater like many of the other Slytherins, but he was much older, closer to Regulus’s parents’ age, so he didn’t spend much time with him.

Theo didn’t look much like him, and Regulus wondered if he took after his mother instead. He remembered stories about Nott and his wife, how his wife hadn’t been allowed to leave their house in several years, and how Nott would keep her locked up and hidden away.

Theo gave him an oddly serious nod, making Regulus wonder how much Theo had been told about the Black family. “Ready?” He said, his voice bored and without inflection.

“Go ahead,” Regulus said, though he was far more interested in watching Harry and Draco than he was in this duel. He waited for Theo to make the first move, though it was clear that Theo was doing the same for him, an obvious Slytherin tactic.

“*Expelliarmus*,” Regulus said lazily. Theo sidestepped the spell and threw a Disarming Charm back at Regulus. “*Protego*.” Theo’s face morphed from one of disinterest to one of determination, though only for a moment before the mask was back in place.

“Stop! Stop!” Lockhart yelled, interrupting their half-hearted duel. Regulus looked over to see Harry’s feet dancing around as a result of a *Tarantallegra*. Snape cast a quick *Finite Incantatem*. Regulus looked around to see Ron apologizing to Seamus, his wand no doubt doing something he hadn’t planned for it to do. Hermione and Millicent seemed to have abandoned their wands as Millicent was holding Hermione in a headlock.

Regulus cast a quick, silent spell that would release Millicent’s arms from their place around Hermione’s head, while Harry ran over to help pull her off. Once they were all reset, Lockhart and Snape went over to give Harry and Draco some actual instruction.

Regulus was watching them and almost missed Theo’s body shifting into a dueling stance. He threw another Disarming spell, but Regulus, barely paying attention, threw up a silent shield



to block the spell. Theo's mouth hung open in shock and only then did Regulus realize what he had done. He looked around to make sure no one else had seen, but it seemed most of the room was still focused on Harry and Draco.

*"Serpensortia!"* Draco yelled, drawing the attention of the room, including Theo. Of course, Draco summoned a snake, Regulus thought. Regulus found it delightful if he was honest. It reminded him of his time in Slytherin during his first life when he and the other first-year Slytherin would summon snakes and let them loose in the castle, their own form of mischief. However, his moment of nostalgia was ruined when the hissing began.

Regulus had grown very used to the constant hissing. It wasn't nearly as loud as it used to be but it was still ceaseless. Now though, the sound was loud and present and it was... coming out of Harry? Harry was hissing at the conjured snake and it looked like the snake was responding to him.

The snake was moving towards a student, but when Harry began to hiss, the snake turned to look at him. The snake sank down to the ground and Harry smiled. Some Hufflepuff child that Regulus didn't know yelled at Harry, and Harry's smile dropped into a face of confusion. There was chaos in the room, but Hermione quickly pulled Regulus after Ron, who was already dragging Harry out of the room.

"You're a Parselmouth. Why didn't you tell us?" Ron demanded once they reached the Gryffindor common room.

"I'm a what?" Harry asked obliviously. It didn't take long for them to find out that Harry had no idea that he was a Parselmouth and in fact, only heard English when he was speaking Parseltongue.

"And now the whole school is going to think you're his great-great-great-grandson or something," Ron said, referring to Salazar Slytherin. Harry looked very distressed.

"But I'm not," Harry whined.

"The Potters aren't related to Salazar Slytherin," Regulus interrupted what Hermione had been about to say.

"How do you know?" Hermione demanded.

"Pureblood families track their bloodline obsessively, if the Potters were descendants of Slytherin, then we would all probably know."

"See? So I'm not related to him," Harry said, waving his hand wildly in the air. This fact didn't seem to relax any of them though. They all knew the rest of the school would believe what they wanted to believe, regardless of the truth.

Regulus, however, had more important issues at the moment. The hissing sound that he'd been hearing for months now was Parseltongue. He didn't know why it never occurred to him, but he hadn't ever heard anyone speak it out loud. Why Parseltongue? He supposed it could have to do with the origin of the locket, with the golden snake emblem on the front, but

it did not explain why he was still hearing it constantly while at school when the locket was miles away.

That night he pulled out the diary once the other boys were asleep. "Harry Potter speaks Parseltongue," he wrote. He wasn't sure what made him decide to tell Tom, but it felt important and already his thoughts were becoming too crowded to properly understand what it really meant.

*That is a very rare gift, indeed. How did you discover this?"* Tom responded instantly.

"Today we had dueling lessons," Regulus explained. "Another student summoned a snake and Harry began hissing at it," Regulus said, giving Tom a shortened explanation of what happened at the Dueling Club.

*"How odd,"* Tom said. *"I would not expect someone like him to be able to do that."*

"What do you mean?" Regulus asked.

*"You said he took down the Dark Lord, did you not? Seems that being a Parselmouth would be an unusual gift for someone known for taking down such a powerful, dark wizard,"* Tom wrote.

"I suppose," Regulus agreed, though he wasn't sure he agreed. He didn't know what Parseltongue had to do with destroying the Dark Lord.

*"What did he tell the snake to do?"* Tom wrote after a long pause.

"He says that he was telling the snake not to attack another student, but it was hard to tell. It only sounded like hissing to all of us, some students probably think he was encouraging it rather than trying to stop it," Regulus explained.

*"What do you think he was doing?"*

"I believe him. Harry isn't one to lie. He says he had no idea he could speak Parseltongue until we told him."

*"He cannot hear the difference?"* Tom asked, the words appearing almost instantly.

"Apparently not. I wonder if that's common for Parselmouths," Regulus wrote in response.

*"I don't believe so,"* Tom replied. *"Though I have never known one, it was my understanding that they could hear the difference and purposefully switch between them."*

Regulus pondered that for a long moment, but when he asked Tom another question about it, Tom seemed uninterested. He changed the subject soon after, and Regulus let the matter rest for the time being.

The next morning, Regulus was more exhausted than he had been in a while. The Parseltongue whispers were growing louder as the day went on. They were right in assuming that the rest of the school would now be suspicious of Harry, as they were met with silent

glares when they were in the common room. Regulus stuck close to Harry most of the morning, worried that someone might try to hex him when his back was turned. By lunchtime though, Regulus was growing too weak to continue through the day. He pulled Ron aside as they walked to the Great Hall.

“Are you okay, mate? You look a bit peaky,” Ron said before Regulus could say anything.

“I think I just need to lie down for a bit,” Regulus answered truthfully, he was so dreadfully tired. “I want you to watch Harry’s back though. I don’t like the way the other students are looking at him.” Ron nodded seriously.

“Of course. See you later,” he said, giving Regulus a wave as he headed to lunch. Regulus turned and headed up to the common room.

He was having the strangest dream. He felt cold and drained as he walked through the castle like he had been attacked by a vampire and exsanguinated. His fingertips began to turn blue in front of him as he stumbled along. He dreamt of the hissing, except now it came out of his mouth, a noise he had never made and wasn’t sure he could replicate even if he tried.

*“How did you find me?” Regulus asked. He was back at the top of the Astronomy tower, a standard place for him nowadays.*

*“I have my ways,” James said. “I needed to speak to you.” James stood with squared shoulders like he was preparing for a fight. Regulus had noticed James following him around since the start of school only two weeks prior, but up until now, he’d successfully avoided him.*

*“Are we not already speaking?” Regulus said in a bored voice.*

*“Why were you fighting with Sirius yesterday?” James demanded. While his voice up until now had been soft, with a drop of mirth mixed in, it now sounded vaguely accusatory.*

*“Because he’s annoying,” Regulus answered simply. “Besides, it is hardly any of your business what we fight about.”*

*“It’s my business when he spends all day sulking because his baby brother is being awful to him,” James said fiercely. “Hasn’t he already been through enough?”*

*Regulus bristled at the implication. “What is that supposed to mean?”*

*“You know exactly what I mean,” James said, taking a step toward Regulus. “How could you treat him like that after what happened this summer?”*

*“My argument with Sirius has nothing to do with what my parents did to him,” Regulus said through clenched teeth. “You and Sirius are exactly the same. Always quick to compare me to them.”*

*James looked shocked but recovered after only a moment. “I don’t think you’re like your parents,” he said.*

*Regulus rolled his eyes and turned around to look back at the sky. "Whatever, it doesn't matter what you think anyway. Sirius sees me as the same as them," Regulus said glumly.*

*James was silent for so long that Regulus thought he might have left. "Why didn't you tell him what you did that summer?" When he spoke, Regulus nearly jumped out of his skin, his voice now right next to Regulus. "Or at least let me tell him."*

*Regulus gave him a warning glare. "Leave it."*

*"Come on, Reggie. Don't you want him to know? I mean, I hate to say this, but he probably wouldn't be alive if you didn't get him out," James pleaded.*

*"You said you wouldn't say anything," was all Regulus said in response.*

*"And I won't," James said. "But that doesn't mean I agree with it." James looked so sanguine that Regulus almost felt bad for him.*

*"He doesn't need to know. It's better that he doesn't anyways."*

*"So what? You're just going to keep fighting and bickering with him every moment of the day,"*

*James said helplessly.*

*"If I must," Regulus mumbled. James glared at him. "You don't have any siblings. You wouldn't understand."*

*"Sirius is like a brother to me," James refuted.*

*"And that's exactly the problem, isn't it?" Regulus spat. "He'd rather be your brother than mine." James sighed. "Listen. Just because I didn't want Sirius to die on the floor of my father's study, doesn't mean that I want to be best friends with him. Besides, he's made it more than clear that he has enough friends without me ruining it for him."*

*"You both are so stubborn," James muttered. "You would both be so much happier if you would just try and speak to one another."*

*Regulus let out a long sigh. "I'll think about it," he said, mostly to get James to drop it. James shot him such a blinding smile that Regulus's knees grew weak. He sometimes forgot how beautiful James was. He was always too busy resenting him to recognize it.*

*"That's all I'm asking," James said happily. He turned to leave, but as he reached the top of the stairwell, Regulus called out.*

*"Hey James," he said. James turned to him with a look of bright hopefulness. "Don't call me Reggie."*

*He woke just as tired as he was when he fell asleep. He was shivering under the covers, still wearing his school uniform from earlier. He couldn't remember making it up to the common room, but he figured he was too burnt out to focus on where he was going. It was dark in the dorm room, and he could hear the light snores of his dormmates indicating that it was most*

likely late at night. He thought about getting up and dressing in his pajamas, but he abandoned the thought quickly, sleep already pulling at the edges of his consciousness.

## **the polyjuice potion.**

Finding out that Justin and Nearly Headless Nick had been petrified should have shocked Regulus more than it did when he found out the next day, but instead, he just felt numb to the news. The rest of the student body was downright panicking and it was clear that Harry wasn't dealing with the negative attention very well. Ron and Hermione stuck close to him though, and Regulus watched the other students carefully, intent on protecting Harry should he need it.

Luckily, the Christmas holidays were just around the corner, and before they knew it the castle was almost completely empty. Draco along with his two friends stayed at school. Regulus completed the Polyjuice Potion the night before Christmas, so Harry, Hermione, and Ron were set on going forward with their plan to sneak into the common room.

"Who are you going to change into? If we're going to be Crabbe and Goyle?" Ron asked him one evening while they were getting ready for bed.

"I'm not changing into anyone, I'm not going with you," Regulus answered distractedly.

"What?" Harry asked. "Why not?"

"You don't need that many people to sneak in. If anything, it will make you look more suspicious," Regulus replied.

"There's no way we could do this without you!" Ron said a little too loudly. Regulus rolled his eyes goodnaturedly.

"Don't worry, you won't be totally alone. I'll help you find the common room, make things a little easier," Regulus offered before he could think better of it.

"How do you know where the Slytherin common room is?" Harry asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Regulus said with an overly arrogant smirk. Harry laughed. "I mean honestly boys, you didn't think to figure out where the entrance is before now? You have an invisibility cloak for Merlin's sake. You could have just followed a student there."

"Oh, right," Harry mumbled.

Christmas morning arrived warm and comforting. Regulus hadn't fully recovered from his last bout of sickness, but he was at least rested enough to enjoy the slow morning of opening presents in the dorm room. Harry received a toothpick from the Dursleys, along with a note asking him to find out if he could stay at school over the summer, and Regulus just about lit the piece of paper on fire. He tried to subtly ask about Harry's family again, but Harry was cagey and clearly embarrassed that Regulus had seen the 'gift' and declined to answer. Regulus let it go for the time being, but he knew he needed to find a way to help Harry during the summers.

They planned to go through with the Polyjuice after dinner. Hermione came up with the plan to give Crabbe and Goyle chocolate cakes with Sleeping Draughts in them. She already had the hair of the girl she wanted to turn into, Millicent Bulstrode, who had gone home for Christmas. Regulus was almost certain they would be caught, but he planned to throw out the potion the moment they left the bathroom and hoped they wouldn't get into too much trouble.

"Sure you don't want to come with us?" Harry asked at the last moment.

"You couldn't pay me to drink Polyjuice potion," Regulus said with a laugh.

"You say that like you've had it before," Ron said, surprisingly perceptive. Regulus had only used Polyjuice a few times, all during his short stint as an active Death Eater, but he had no desire to repeat the uncomfortable process.

"I do read. It says it will be unpleasant," Regulus explained. He separated the potion into three different cauldrons and watched as they all put their hairs in. They each entered a stall for privacy, and Regulus listened as they moaned with displeasure as the Polyjuice changed their bodies. He knew it was uncomfortable, and he was surprised they were managing it as well as they could. It took a long moment before anyone spoke, and he was just beginning to grow nervous, when Harry and Ron came out of their stalls.

"You don't have much time," Regulus said. "Hermione, are you ready? I'll show you where the Slytherin common room is."

"I - I don't think I'm going to come after all. You go on without me," Hermione replied in a squeaky voice. Regulus knew instantly that something had gone horribly wrong with the potion. Harry and Ron were clearly torn, but since they were already running out of time, Hermione shooed them along.

"I'll be right back, okay Hermione?" Regulus called.

"I'm fine," she said in reply. Regulus walked them to the common room quickly. He thought of how revolted he would be if the first-life version of himself found out about this, but at that moment all he could think of was how hilarious James and Sirius would find this plan. The thought caused a pang of sadness to creep into his thoughts, but he did his best to push it away. Now wasn't the time to spiral into depression, he would have to wait till later to do that on his own.

"What's the password?" Ron said.

"You really should have had a better plan for this," Regulus replied with a roll of his eyes.

"Try saying something in Parseltongue, Harry. I wonder if it will work." Harry scrunched up his face in concentration before finally speaking.

"Open," he said in English. Regulus just barely held himself from bursting out laughing. Ron did not have the same self-control, letting out an uncomfortably loud laugh. A blush crawled across Harry's face.

“Try imagining a snake. You said you didn’t know you were talking in Parseltongue, so maybe it only comes out when it’s needed,” Regulus said.

“Okay,” Harry said and closed his eyes. After a minute, he opened his mouth again but this time the haunting hissing sound came out. Regulus was right, Parseltongue worked on the Slytherin common room entrance. There was no way Harry wasn’t going to use this for mischievous purposes in the future, Regulus thought.

“Be careful,” Regulus whispered. “And don’t get caught.” The other boys nodded quickly before heading into the common room. Regulus walked swiftly back to the girls’ bathroom.

“Hermione?” He called when he entered the room.

“Go away!” Hermione squeaked.

“Are you injured?” Regulus walked toward the stall she was closed up in.

“Hello, Regulus,” Myrtle said, appearing through the closed stall door. She gave him a flirty wave and a wink. Regulus gave her a polite smile in return. “Oh, wait till you see. It’s awful,” she added. Regulus did his best to ignore her.

“Hermione, please come out and let me help you,” Regulus said, nervousness creeping into his voice. Hermione finally emerged from the stall in tears. Regulus understood immediately what must have happened, having read enough information about the potion. “It was cat hair, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Hermione cried. “It must have stuck to her robes!”

“It’s okay, let’s get you to the Hospital Wing,” Regulus said. Hermione took some convincing but eventually, he managed to get her to leave the bathroom. Madam Pomfrey gave them a few disappointed looks but didn’t ask too many questions and sent Regulus off soon after they arrived.

“Where is Hermione?” Ron asked the moment the two boys reentered the bathroom.

“She had a bad reaction to the Polyjuice potion, she’s fine,” Regulus clarified quickly. “I took her to the Hospital Wing. Now, tell me what happened.”

“Well, we know for sure that Malfoy isn’t the Heir,” Harry said. He sounded so disappointed about this that Regulus almost laughed.

“All he told us was that the last time it was opened a muggleborn died,” Ron explained, “and that the person responsible for it is probably still in Azkaban.”

“I wonder who it was last time,” Regulus wondered honestly.

“No idea,” Harry said with a shrug. “But if it wasn’t Malfoy then we are back with nothing.”

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It was clear that Hermione was embarrassed about the half-cat half-human form she had taken on, but Ron and Harry could not be convinced to stay away from the Hospital Wing. The two of them visited her every night, bringing her homework and often eating dinner with her in the weeks after the mishap. Regulus went along with them several times a week but still opted to spend most of his time in the library or exploring the castle on Tom's instruction.

"This is hopeless, I fear," Regulus wrote one evening while sitting in the library.

*"Don't give up hope, I think we will find it,"* Tom wrote in reply.

"Not soon enough. Who knows who else will be hurt before I can find the entrance? I should have gone to Dumbledore way before now."

*"If Dumbledore knew how to stop it, would he not have already done so?"*

"Yes. I guess that's true. I cannot imagine Dumbledore letting this go on like this. Still, I keep thinking that maybe I should have told him what I already know. Maybe about what's happening to me."

*"Are you sure you can trust him?"*

"No, I'm not sure. He's intelligent, and more cunning than people give him credit for I would guess, but also he's the only one who knows my secret and he let me stay at the school. He hasn't interfered."

*"What would James do?"* Regulus shuddered when he read the words. He'd forgotten that he mentioned James when explaining why he was trying to protect Harry. Of course, he'd left out most of the details of their failed relationship, sequestering James to the category of 'old friend.' Though he wasn't sure that Tom really believed that.

"He'd go right to Dumbledore," Regulus answered honestly. "He would probably have contacted Dumbledore the moment he woke up in that rotten cave."

*"The cave where the Dark Lord's weapon was hidden?"* Tom had been understandably interested in what exactly Regulus was trying to steal from the Dark Lord, but Regulus had done his best to keep it from him. That piece of information was dangerous. If anyone caught word of what he had, his entire plan could come crashing down.

"Yes, that cave," Regulus answered vaguely. He was about to write more when he was interrupted midthought by the loud giggles of a group of girls sitting near him. They looked like first-years and each of them wore a Ravenclaw uniform.

"What's wrong, Loony?" One of them sneered at a girl walking passed. She was making her way down the main aisle of the library, coming directly between Regulus's table and the girls' table. "Are your feet cold?" The girls broke into cruel giggles once again.

“No, I’m quite all right. Thank you for asking, though,” the girl responded. She had a bright head of white-blond hair. She seemed so familiar to him, but he couldn’t quite place her, her face still blocked from his view by a wall of hair. He looked down and noticed that she was walking through the library barefoot.

“Whatever, Loony.” Regulus watched the blonde girl walk deeper into the library while the other Ravenclaw girls went back to their discussion. Regulus waited only a moment before he got up to follow her.

He found her a few rows back sitting at an otherwise empty table. She was already watching him as he approached. When their eyes met, Regulus immediately recognized her. Of course, this was Pandora’s daughter. Her hair was the same color and her eyes, a glassy blue, had the same haunting glitter to them. She smiled at Regulus, like she recognized him, and Regulus found himself smiling back at her.

“Hello,” he greeted. “What’s your name?”

“Luna,” she said with an airy smile.

“Can I sit with you, Luna?” He asked. She nodded. “I’m Regulus, by the way.”

“I know,” she replied in that mysterious voice her mother always used. Regulus felt oddly like he was about to cry. He did his best to swallow down his feelings.

“Of course,” he said quietly. “What happened to your shoes?” He asked. She looked below the table, almost like she’d forgotten that they were missing.

“Oh,” she said, “Some of my housemates have hidden them.”

“What?” He asked, alarmed. “Why?”

She gave him an easy smile. “It’s a game we play. They hide my things, and I find them around the castle.”

“That doesn’t sound like a very nice game,” Regulus said.

“It’s okay,” she said with a shrug. “I’m glad they’re having fun.” Luna was so much like her mother, her voice, her appearance, her knowing glance, but she was also so gentle. Where Pandora was fiery and demanding, though, in an understated way, Luna was soft. “Besides, my mum always said things we lose have a way of coming back to us in the end. If not always in the way we expect.”

Regulus gave her a small smile before the words really sunk in. *Said*, he thought, *past tense*. “Your mum is very smart,” he responded gently.

“She was.” Luna nodded. “She died when I was nine,” she said, answering Regulus’s unspoken question.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Regulus said, trying to swallow the lump in his throat. He hadn’t thought about Pandora much since he came back, only a few times here and there, but he

wouldn't have dragged her into this even if he had the opportunity. If Luna was nine when she died, then she must have passed away during the missing years, when Kreacher no longer had access to the Prophet.

"You don't look well," Luna said suddenly. "Are you ill?" Good to know that Luna has the same bluntness her mother had, Regulus thought.

"I have been, but I'm getting better," he responded. "Would you like me to transfigure you some new shoes?"

Luna looked at her feet again for a moment, before nodding. "I think that would be nice, thank you." He smiled at her, and crouched down next to the desk, transfiguring two pieces of paper into two shoes. He stayed at the table with her after that, forgetting completely about the conversation he was having with Tom.

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It was nearly February before Regulus had time to write in the diary again.

"I'm not sure that this search is that helpful," Regulus wrote. "I wonder if there is a faster way to find the entrance to the Chamber other than what we're doing."

"*Hello, Regulus,*" Tom wrote in reply. "*It has been a while .*" Tom was always so petty when Regulus ignored him for too long.

"I've been busy," Regulus said simply. "Any ideas for how else we can find the Chamber?"

"*What have you been busy doing?*" Regulus rolled his eyes at Tom's words. He looked up to see Luna entering the library. She came to sit across from him, as had become her standard practice since they met. She was still wearing the transfigured shoes he'd made for her, and he gave her a warm smile.

"I'll try to be more diligent about writing to you," Regulus wrote placatingly, "but we have bigger problems right, don't you think?"

"*Yes, very well,*" Tom wrote.

Regulus's hands were bloody. Or at least, he thought they were bloody. The cold winter air was drying out his skin as he stood outside. The warm blood on his hands grew colder and colder by the minute. How did he get out here?

"*We have to stop meeting like this.*" Regulus sighed when he heard the voice behind him.

"*Really, James? How is it that you keep finding me?*" Regulus said, turning around to see James standing in the grass. Regulus had been sitting out by the forest watching the sunset, though it had been dark for nearly an hour now and he was still outside, letting the October chill seep into his bones.

*"I just wanted to bring you this," James said, sidestepping the question. He sat down next to Regulus, their shoulders only an inch apart. Regulus only barely stopped himself from shifting away or shifting closer. James handed over a sandwich wrapped.*

*"You just wanted to bring me food?" Regulus asked. James smiled at him brightly.*

*"I noticed you weren't at dinner," James said simply. Regulus rolled his eyes at him. "Actually, I've noticed that you are almost never at dinner anymore."*

*"Stalking me now, are you?" Regulus thought he might be hallucinating for a second because it almost looked like James's cheeks darkened in embarrassment. He wasn't sure that he'd ever seen James look abashed.*

*"Not stalking," James said slowly. "Just... looking out for you."*

*"Why?" Regulus asked before he could stop himself. "Did Sirius put you up to this?"*

*"No! No, of course not," James said.*

*"Of course not?" Regulus said with a derisive laugh.*

*"Stop that," James said firmly. Regulus looked at him in surprise. "Sirius does care about you, he's just... he just has trouble showing it."*

*Regulus laughed then. 'Having trouble showing it' was a very polite way to describe Sirius's behavior. "It's fine, James. I'm just messing with you," he said.*

*"Right," James said, "of course." James paused for a long moment. Regulus was about to ask him what he was still doing there when he started speaking again. "So why haven't you been at the Slytherin table then?"*

*"Worried about me?" Regulus replied, looking over at him.*

*"And if I am?" James said, looking back, his eyes serious and kind.*

*Regulus sighed. "I just haven't felt like spending time with my fellow Slytherins much, that's all."*

*"But you are still eating, right?" James asked worriedly.*

*"Yes, James," Regulus said. "You guys aren't the only ones who know how to get into the kitchens." James chuckled.*

*"So," James said after a long moment of silence, "what else is new?" Regulus couldn't help the genuine laugh that poured out of him.*

*"We're going to make small talk now?" Regulus asked.*

*"We can talk about whatever you like," James said. He knocked his shoulder against Regulus's, and Regulus just barely managed to hold back the shiver he felt.*

*“And if I don’t want to talk?” Regulus asked. He looked out at the Black Lake, avoiding James’s eyes.*

*“Then we can just sit here,” James replied. He knocked his shoulder against Regulus again, but this time he didn’t move away. He just let it sit there. The warmth from his body seemed to radiate off him in waves, warming Regulus to his very core.*

*“Okay,” Regulus replied. So that’s what they did.*

Regulus was standing in the common room. His cloak was wet, nearly dragging on the ground as it was weighed down with water. His hands were cold and shriveled like he’d been outside swimming in the frozen lake. He couldn’t remember what he was doing before this, but the common room was empty, and it was clearly late at night. He trudged up the stairs and dressed in a pair of warm pajamas. When he crawled into bed, all he could think about was James’s warm arms and how it felt when they held him the last time.

It wasn’t until the next morning that Regulus realized something. Tom Riddle’s diary, which he always kept hidden under his pillow or cradled against his chest while he slept, was missing.

# the scapegoat.

## Chapter Notes

i'm trying to update this fic on mondays, wednesdays, and fridays.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*It's gone. It's gone. It's gone.*

The phrase repeated like a chant in his mind. The diary that he had carefully guarded for weeks had disappeared. He scoured the entire dormitory, inspecting every trunk and drawer owned by his fellow dormmates. Despite his efforts, he couldn't seem to locate it and grew increasingly frustrated. He attempted to *accio* it multiple times but to no avail.

How could it be gone? He couldn't remember how he got back to the common room the night before. He thought he might have been outside, but all he could think about was the dream he had about James. One of their first meetings on a cold October night. Was he actually outside or was the dream just a memory? He couldn't tell.

He left the dorm then. All of his dormmates were up already, the sunny Saturday morning pulling them outside. He made his way quickly to the Black Lake, the same place he'd been in the memory. There were groups of kids out everywhere he walked, and he vaguely wondered where Ron and Harry were, though it seemed likely they were at the Quidditch pitch or visiting Hermione.

He made it to the shore of the Black Lake, the entire time searching the grounds, but there was nothing. When he reached the shaded spot he'd once sat with James, he fell to his knees and only barely stopped the desperate sob working its way up his throat. He'd lost the diary, the only thing he had to help him find the Chamber.

He was doing a terrible job protecting Harry. He thought of how disappointed James had looked the last time he'd spoken to him. He thought of James's heartbroken eyes, silently begging Regulus to tell him it was all a joke, that he hadn't gotten the mark, that he hadn't betrayed him. What would James think of him now? Dragged back from the dead, trying to protect his son, just to fail again and again.

Regulus couldn't do a single thing right. Not in this life or his last one. Every step he took was a misstep. Every time he tried to make a decision, he made a mistake. And when he froze, trying to weigh the odds of each choice, he still failed.

He pulled his knees up to his chest, and wrapped his arms around his legs, trying desperately to hold himself together. He couldn't stop the silent tears that ran down his face. His only hope was that no one would spot him hidden behind the trees. What was he going to do now? He didn't know.

He wished James was here, James would know. Or Lily even. Though he was desperately jealous of her, he knew she would be doing a better job than he was. That was why James chose her in the first place. Where Regulus failed, Lily succeeded. If she was alive, Harry wouldn't be in so much danger. She'd know what to do.

He even wished for Sirius, though the thought surprised him. Of course, he didn't wish for the traitorous murderer who was rotting away in Azkaban. Or maybe he did. He didn't know. But really, he wished for the brother who left him behind. The Sirius that always knew where he was going, who threw off the shackles of rules and authority and blazed through life.

He missed his brother so fiercely that he thought he might crack open. He missed the brother who would sneak him treats after their parents screamed at them. The brother who told him stories the night before he left for Hogwarts. The brother who promised he would always come back, always care about him.

It was a long time before Regulus could get his emotions under control. He was just so tired. He still felt cold from the night before, his fingers still aching from the chill. He felt like he hadn't slept since before he died. Like he was just floating through his second life. When he finally managed to stop crying, he wiped his face and headed back up to Hogwarts. He passed by Hagrid picking up what looked like dead roosters, but he didn't have the emotional capacity to deal with that at the moment. He just kept walking.

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By the time Valentine's Day rolled around a few days later, Regulus felt like he was going to crumble under all his inadequacies. Since he'd spiraled by the Black Lake, he'd never quite come out of it. The diary was still missing, and there was nothing Regulus could do about it. He avoided Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Even after Hermione got out of the Hospital Wing, he continued avoiding them. He didn't even go back to the library to sit with Luna. Opting instead to wander the castle until the minute before curfew.

He couldn't figure out why summoning the diary didn't work. It made him think of the locket, and he wondered what kind of magic was in the diary that would react the same way. He wondered if he could destroy the diary, not that he could test that theory. Regardless, it made him feel unsettled. If he was honest, there was something always unsettling about the diary, but he'd still much rather have it in his possession than know it was out there in the hands of someone else.

That morning Regulus decided to finally join his classmates in the Great Hall for breakfast after avoiding them for the past week. He immediately regretted it when he noticed the ridiculous way the Hall was decorated. The walls were draped with eye-assaulting pink flowers and heart-shaped confetti was falling from the ceiling.

On their way to class, Harry was all but chased by a dwarf dressed like Cupid who knocked him to the floor to sing a badly written poem. *The hero who conquered the Dark Lord* ,

honestly who wrote this? Regulus was stuck between cringing at the display and laughing helplessly at Harry's bright red face.

He didn't even notice all of Harry's stuff on the ground until Draco sauntered up and grabbed one of the books that fell from Harry's bag.

"Give that back," Harry said quietly, a vicious glare on his face.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?" Malfoy said loudly. Regulus barely heard him, because in Draco's little pale hands was Tom Riddle's diary. How did Harry manage to get the diary? Regulus searched his trunk when he searched the dorm room, but clearly, Harry had been carrying it around with him. Did he steal it? Why would he do that?

Regulus's thoughts were racing, and he only barely stopped himself from walking up and snatching the diary out of Draco's hands. That would be too suspicious, he needed to ask Harry about the diary when they had a moment in private. Watching another child touch the diary made Regulus feel sick to his stomach, though he couldn't figure out why. There was a possessive feeling clawing its way up his throat. The same feeling he got when he looked at the locket.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry shouted, and the diary shot out of Draco's hands. Ron caught it with a wide grin. Regulus followed them into Charms in a daze, thinking about how to get the diary back from Harry.

Harry went to bed early that evening, clearly annoyed by Fred and George singing "His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad" over and over again, and Regulus was about to follow him when another Gryffindor stopped him.

"Hey, Regulus, right?" It was a fourth year boy who spoke to him. Regulus didn't recognize him.

"Yes," he said suspiciously.

"There's a Ravenclaw at the door asking for you," he replied, gesturing toward the portrait hole. Regulus got up and walked out to find Luna hovering right outside the entrance.

"Luna?" He asked. "How did you know where the Gryffindor common room was?"

"Oh, it was easy," she said airily. "I just followed a few students here." Regulus let the door close behind him.

"What's going on?" *Why are you here?* That is what he didn't ask.

"I wanted to give you this," Luna said with a dazed smile. She held her hands out and Regulus reached up to grab the piece of parchment she was cradling. It was a small, heart-shaped letter made of bright pink parchment. He was worried for a moment about what the letter would contain, he didn't think he could hand an eleven-year-old having a crush on him, but all that was written was:

*Regulus,*



*I'm glad we know each other.*

*Luna.*

"Thanks, Luna," he said. Though the letter was slim in its contents, from someone like Luna he knew it meant a lot.

"I wanted to give it to you earlier, but I think you've been avoiding me," Luna said matter of factly. Regulus opened his mouth to deny it, though it was true, but she interrupted him. "It's okay, I understand. I just wanted to see if you were feeling better."

"Feeling better?" Regulus asked, confused for a second. "Oh, yes, I'm feeling better," he said, though it wasn't strictly true.

"That's nice," she replied. "Well, good night Regulus." She gave him a wave and turned to leave.

"Luna," he called after her. He waited till she turned back around to speak. "Thank you. I'm lucky to have a friend like you."

Her eyes seemed to light up at the word 'friend,' but the dazed smile she always wore stayed unmoving. "I think my mum would be happy that we met."

*What?* Regulus watched as she walked away without another glance back. What did she mean by that? He wondered if it was just something Luna said, but there was something in the way she spoke to him. Almost like she knew. But there was no way she could know, right?

Regulus was still reeling from his conversation with Luna when he re-entered the common room. He noticed Ron heading up to the dorms and decided to follow him. He still needed to talk to Harry, but he wouldn't be able to if Ron was in the room. He figured he would wait until tomorrow, but he needed to make sure he stole the diary tonight.

Harry was laying spread out on his bed when they entered, he was sweaty and shaking violently.

"Harry? What's going on?" Regulus asked. The diary was laying open on his stomach. Regulus felt the stone weight of dread drop into his stomach.

"It was Hagrid. Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago," Harry said.

"What?" Ron said loudly. Regulus didn't reply. How did Harry know that? He looked at the diary again. "Wait, I'm going to get Hermione, she needs to hear about this." Ron practically ran out of the room.

"Where did you get that?" Regulus blurted out. Harry looked down at the diary before looking back up with a guilty expression that Regulus was becoming all too familiar with. Regulus sighed loudly. "Are you going to tell me what's going on or not?"

“Well,” Harry said slowly, he’d finally sat and now was dangling his legs off the side of the bed. Regulus crossed his arms, impatiently waiting for him to continue. “It was a week or so ago. Ron and I were walking past the girls’ bathroom, you know, Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom?” Regulus nodded for him to continue. “Apparently someone tried to flush this down the toilet.” He held up the book to indicate what he was talking about.

“So you decided to what?” Regulus prompted.

“Well, we were trying to figure out what it was. There wasn’t any writing in it, but Ron recognized the name, Tom Riddle. He won an award for special services to the school fifty years ago, you see, so we figured something must be important about it.”

“He did what? What special services?” Regulus asked bewildered.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you! He got Hagrid expelled after he opened the Chamber of Secrets,” Harry said in a pleading voice.

“Okay, wait, let’s go back,” Regulus said, holding out his hands to stop Harry from his tirade. “Why didn’t you tell me about this before?” The guilty expression was back, Regulus was going to smother Harry in his sleep.

“I was going to tell you, but well, you were so sick, and you’re always so worried,” Harry said. “Plus you weren’t around very much, so we figured we would just wait.” Harry was rambling a bit now, but Regulus didn’t stop him, instead just glaring and letting him flounder for a few more moments. “And I’m telling you now! We’re telling you now,” he corrected. “Besides, we know more. Tom showed me what happened, with the Chamber I mean, and Hagrid.”

“He showed you?” Regulus whispered. Harry’s face paled. Regulus hadn’t intended to speak in such a menacing voice, but he couldn’t keep the worry that was digging its way out of him.

“Yes, I asked if he knew anything about the Chamber, and he said he could show me, then I was... I don’t know... like sucked into the diary,” Harry tried to explain.

“Wait, wait, what’s going on?” Hermione said loudly as she and Ron entered the dorm room. Regulus was ridiculously thankful that Dean, Seamus, and Neville were all still in the common room. He didn’t think this conversation should be overheard by too many other children.

“Let’s all sit down,” Regulus said. “And you three can tell me exactly what happened from the beginning.” It spoke to how annoyed Regulus was that the three of them sat in a row on Harry’s bed without question, quickly launching into an explanation.

Tom Riddle had apparently used some form of Legilimency to show Harry a specific memory, one where Tom was integral in capturing the person who opened the Chamber of Secrets, which was apparently why Hagrid had been expelled but failed to explain why he still lived on the grounds and was allowed to experiment with large, dangerous creatures whenever he felt like it.

“It doesn’t make any sense though,” Hermione said. “I thought only the heir could open the Chamber, surely Hagrid isn’t related to Salazar Slytherin.”

“Maybe there’s another way to open the Chamber,” Ron posited.

“Right,” Harry said, nodding in agreement. “And it’s not completely unreasonable. I mean we know he has a thing for monsters, right?”

“Maybe Riddle got the wrong person,” Hermione said. “It could have been a different monster that was attacking people...” It felt like all three of them were having separate conversations. Regulus said nothing, still trying to make sense of the fact that the diary had actually shown Harry a memory.

“Do you think we should go and ask Hagrid about it all?” Regulus heard Harry say when he tuned back into the conversation.

“Maybe,” Regulus replied. “Though it might be a bit uncomfortable to ask someone about that. I’m sure it’s not a pleasant memory for him either way.” The three of them seemed pensive after this comment, unsure of how to proceed.

“Okay, why don’t we just wait and see?” Hermione finally said. Regulus raised his eyebrows in surprise. “If there is another attack then we’ll ask him.” The other two nodded in agreement, looking relieved that they could avoid the conversation a little longer. Regulus wasn’t sure he agreed with them, but he wasn’t going to argue that now. If anything, he wanted them as far away from this issue as he could get them, and if Hagrid really was dangerous, then it was better that they avoided him altogether.

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Regulus waited until Hermione had gone back to her dorm and Ron and Harry were asleep before he took the diary out of Harry’s trunk. He wondered if he should just tell them that he was taking it back, or taking it at all, but for some reason, he felt the intense desire to keep his possession of the diary a complete secret. He closed the curtains around his bed and locked them with a spell before opening the diary.

“Why did you show Harry that memory?” Regulus wrote, too annoyed to waste time.

“*Hello Regulus Black,*” Tom wrote back. “*I see you’ve decided to write in my diary again.*”

“Enough with this.” Regulus ground his teeth together. “Why didn’t you show me your memory of Hagrid when I asked about the Chamber? You’ve been lying to me this entire time.” His handwriting was shaky, tinged with anger.

“*Why did you throw my diary away?*”

“I didn’t. I have no idea who took the diary from me, but I never did that. I’m sure you can tell, you’ve never had a problem seeing my lies in the past. Now answer me about the

memory.”

*“It wasn’t relevant for you to see.”* Tom’s words were slow to appear. *“I told you a third year was expelled for it.”*

“You told me you didn’t know much else about him.”

*“That’s true. I know very little about Hagrid,”* Tom wrote in reply.

“You knew his name. You knew enough to get him expelled. You could have shown me the same thing that you showed Harry.” Regulus was growing increasingly frustrated and he could feel a headache forming behind his eyes. Tom didn’t write back for a long few minutes and Regulus was about to give up when words appeared on the page.

*“You are right, I should have shown you,”* Tom wrote. *“But I had to be sure that I could trust you first.”* Regulus could feel cold dread working its way down his spine.

“But you could trust Harry?” Regulus asked.

*“Harry is not like you.”* Regulus closed the book with a snap. Tom was jerking him around, and he couldn’t figure out why. He cradled his aching head in his hands, but the headache only grew worse. As Tom’s words sunk in, another thought appeared to Regulus.

“What did you tell Harry about me?” Regulus wrote.

*“I told him nothing. I was not lying when I said I would keep your secrets, just as I kept Ginny’s.”*

“I don’t believe you,” Regulus wrote after a long moment’s pause.

*“That is disappointing.”* Regulus snapped the book closed again before tucking it under his pillow. He would deal with it again in the morning, his head hurt so badly now that it was blurring his vision, and couldn’t deal with Tom again tonight.

*“Come to gloat?”* His words held a challenge, but they were betrayed by the tender smile on James’s face.

*“Yes,”* Regulus responded, placing his hands behind his back in a poor imitation of an overconfident child. *“That was truly a pathetic display out there.”*

*“I’m so sorry for disappointing you,”* James said, his voice huskier than Regulus expected.

*“Who says I’m disappointed?”* Regulus said taking another step closer to James. They stood in an unused classroom. Dusty artifacts and damaged desks and chairs lined the walls. The dim light from the half-covered windows made it feel like it was late in the evening, rather than midafternoon. *“Maybe I like watching you fail.”*

*“In that case,”* James said. He took a step toward Regulus. They were almost chest to chest now. Regulus used to be so annoyed at James and his height advantage, but now when they

*stood eye to eye, he loved the way he had to tilt his head just slightly up to look at him. "I will have to lose more often if only to impress you."*

*"You would throw away the Quidditch Cup? Just for me?" Regulus whispered. Their faces were inches apart now.*

*"If you asked me to," James mumbled, and Regulus saw the honesty in his statement, he saw the power he held over him. Perhaps that was why he leaned in, or at least that's what he told himself later. It wasn't because those full lips tempted him every time he and James spoke. Or because he would fantasize about James flying down in the middle of Quidditch practice just to kiss him. Definitely not.*

*It was because Regulus had James just where he wanted him, not the other way around. That's why he leaned in. That's why he brushed his lips against James's. That's why he unclasped his fingers from behind his back to lace them into James's curly, unruly hair. That's why he let James force his lips open with a gasp. That's why he let James explore his mouth with his tongue.*

Regulus woke to small hands violently shaking him.

"Wake up!" Harry yelled.

"What?" Regulus murmured.

"The diary," Harry said frantically, "it's gone."

"It's not gone," Regulus responded, rolling over to avoid Harry's panicked gaze. "I took it." He hadn't intended to tell Harry that, but he was too groggy from just waking up to realize it.

"Why?" Harry asked. Only then did Regulus's eyes shoot open.

"I wanted to research it," Regulus said slowly.

"Why not just ask me?" Harry asked.

"I was going to tell you," Regulus said snidely, and yes, perhaps using a twelve-year-old's words against him wasn't the most mature choice. Harry looked both offended and abashed at the same time. "I'm sorry," Regulus said immediately. "I didn't mean that. I just wanted to look at it last night, and you were already asleep."

Harry calmed after that, accepting Regulus's explanation. It wasn't until late afternoon that Regulus thought about the dream again. It had felt so real, more realistic than any dream he'd ever had, almost like watching someone else's memory of the event. But there was something odd about it, something that took him a long time to figure out.

Regulus finally realized it two days later. That memory never took place in an unused classroom. Actually, Regulus had no memory of ever being in a classroom like that. He wasn't sure he could place it if he tried. That conversation, and their first kiss, happened behind the Quidditch stands after a game where Gryffindor lost to Slytherin. A stolen moment before they were both expected elsewhere.

Why would he dream that happened somewhere else? It unnerved him for some reason, though he had trouble figuring out why exactly. All he knew was that something was wrong.

## Chapter End Notes

there is a weird glitch on ao3 where if you write something in italics, it will randomly add spaces around the writing. so if you see weird spacing around something in italics, just know that i am doing my best to fix it. if anyone knows how to stop ao3 from doing that please let me know.

## **the dorm.**

### Chapter Notes

cw: some references to sexual content, nothing too crazy but just be aware

With the Easter holidays came the time to choose their third-year electives. Hermione was more anxious than Regulus had ever seen her.

“This could affect our entire future,” she ranted. “You all need to care more about this.” Her hair seemed to be standing on end as she continuously pulled at the roots in stress. Ron and Harry lamented about the classes they wished they could drop, though that wasn’t an option, but beyond that showed no great interest in any particular subject.

Percy, Ron’s prefect brother, gave them a whole speech about ‘playing to their strengths’ that Regulus dutifully ignored. During his first life, Regulus had taken Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, ultimately receiving NEWTs in both courses. He wondered whether he should repeat them now to make it easier on himself. Then he remembered the muggle woman at the library interacting with a strange box in order to give him a library card, and he quickly checked off Muggle Studies.

“Oh, are you taking Muggle Studies also?” Hermione said excitedly. He hadn’t noticed her watching his choice so closely.

“Also? Weren’t you raised by muggles?” Ron asked incredulously. Regulus looked down to see that she had checked off every option for the electives.

“Yes,” Hermione answered, bristling, “but I think it will be fascinating to study it from a wizarding perspective.”

“How exactly do you plan to take every single class?” Regulus asked her.

“Well, it’s not like I can skip them. They all sound so interesting,” she said primly. Regulus only barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes at her.

“What electives are you guys going to take?” He asked Ron and Harry. “You have to pick something.”

“I mean, I don’t mind being outside,” Ron reasoned. “Besides, Charlie took Care of Magical Creatures, and now he works with dragons, so it must be interesting.” Harry nodded along, and Regulus watched as they each checked off the class.

“And what else? You have to take two,” Regulus said. Ron pondered his options again.

"I recon Arithmancy will be too difficult," he mumbled.

"What is Arithmancy?" Harry asked. "Is that like maths?"

"It's predicting the future using numbers," Hermione said. "Isn't that fascinating?" Harry didn't look like he agreed with her, but he also didn't respond.

"How is that different from Divination? Fred and George said Divination is the easiest elective there is," Ron said.

"Well, I read that Arithmancy is much more exact," Hermione began, but Regulus interrupted, knowing she was about to go on a very long, historical lecture about the two topics that would likely bore the other two boys to tears.

"Arithmancy is more for spell work and curse breaking, spending weeks and months figuring out how a certain piece of magic might work before using it. Divination is immediate, but it requires a level of intuitive skill," Regulus explained simply. Or perhaps not simply, as Ron and Harry looked at him as if he'd been speaking in another language.

"How do you know that?" Hermione demanded.

"Probably the same way you know everything, I read," Regulus replied. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"That sounds really complicated," Harry said quietly.

"It is," Regulus said. "Or at least it probably is," he corrected.

"I think I'm just going to take Divination. If Fred and George say it's easy, then it probably is," he concluded. Harry nodded as well and checked it off.

"You're just going to take the same classes as him. Don't you have your own interests?" Regulus asked Harry.

"Well, I'm only really interested in Quidditch, and that's not an option," Harry replied, shrugging haphazardly.

"Harry, you should really take this more seriously," Hermione started, and Regulus tuned her out. Though he agreed with her to a certain extent, he knew that Harry would not be swayed. Besides, Regulus had no desire to force the child into a class he didn't care about.

In the end, Regulus checked off Divination and Care of Magical Creatures as well, taking the max of three electives. Hermione looked annoyed but Regulus shrugged her off. He'd never have been allowed to take those courses. He'd probably be beaten unconscious if he even joked about taking Muggle Studies, and Divinations and Care of Magical Creatures were considered too 'soft' for members of the family to take. He figured he might as well take advantage of the unique freedom that came from all your family being dead or imprisoned.

A few days after the Easter holidays ended, Regulus was in the library by himself. Luna had been with him for most of the evening but had just left to head back to her common room.



Regulus was in the process of packing up his belongings when he saw white blonde hair out of the corner of his eye.

“Forget something?” Regulus asked without looking up.

“I know you’re not who you say you are,” Draco said. Regulus looked up in surprise. Draco’s face was pinched in concentration, his shoulders straightened like he was preparing for a fight.

“I’m sorry?” Regulus asked, confused.

“You will be,” Draco said. “I asked my mother, she said there is no record of you anywhere. She said that you came out of nowhere. You should be worried because they’re going to - ”

“They’re going to what exactly?” Regulus interrupted him. “Whether Narcissa believes I’m who I say I am or not hardly matters. My father is Lord to the family, what exactly is Narcissa planning to do?”

“She’s going to report you,” Draco said firmly.

“Please,” Regulus said. “This is ridiculous. I bet you didn’t even talk to your mother about it. I bet you’re lying.” Regulus put every ounce of pureblood overconfidence he still had in him. Though the thought that Draco had somehow figured him out made him extremely worried, he knew better than to show weakness like that in front of someone.

“I know you’re not really Regulus Black,” Draco said in response. “And I’m going to prove it.”

“You do that,” Regulus said easily, though he knew this would be a problem. How had Draco figured it out? Obviously, he was wrong on one account, he was definitely Regulus Black though not necessarily the one he was claiming to be. He wondered if Narcissa had actually been asked about this. There was no doubt that she would recognize him if she saw him, regardless of how long his hair had gotten, she’d known him through all the awkward stages of his youth.

He tried to brush it off for the time being, but he couldn’t fully shake the worry of what Draco would uncover. From that night on, Regulus noticed Draco watching him periodically, sitting in random places in the castle to keep an eye on what Regulus was doing.

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Regulus hadn’t opened or written in the diary since the night he took it back from Harry. He still kept it close at all hours of the day, worried that someone else would be sucked into some memory of Tom’s again like Harry had been. Tom made him especially uneasy, but without confronting Hagrid there wasn’t much else he could do besides wait.

He thought about reaching out to Dumbledore for help, he knew from Harry's retelling of the memory, that Dumbledore had been at the school when Tom was there, so he might remember something, but each time tried to write the man a wave of nausea would overtake him. One night he was on his way to the headmaster's office and ended up waking up out on the grounds, nearly frozen solid in the cold air.

He couldn't figure out for the life of him how he'd gotten out there, but it wreaked havoc on his already ill body, and he ended up spending several days in the Hospital Wing fighting off a cold. Madam Pomfrey was extremely concerned, giving him several potions to help him fight off the illness and bolster his magical core. He wasn't sure how well it was working, but after a few days he was well enough to go back to classes, and by then he'd all but forgotten about his desire to reach out to Dumbledore.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were clearly worried about Regulus. They all came to visit him while he was in the Hospital Wing, and he kept catching them looking at him with a dull angst that made them frown deeply in perturbation. Luna seemed to be especially distressed by his sickness. She cornered him after he left the Hospital Wing and demanded to know why he was still getting sick, but he didn't have an answer for her. He worried that at this rate he would never fully recover.

He kept thinking about his explanation of Arithmancy to Harry, the usage of numbers to predict how a piece of magic might behave. He kept berating himself for not thinking of it before using the Breiða Sjáflr ritual. There was no reason for him to use it immediately, it was by far the most moronic choice he'd ever made, including letting the Dark Lord mark him.

He was torn from a dream early on Saturday morning by the loud hissing of Parseltongue. He almost threw his pillow across the room at Harry to get him to shut up before he realized that Harry wasn't even in the room. Right, it was the morning of the Quidditch game against Hufflepuff, Harry was probably already at breakfast. He couldn't figure out where the hissing was coming from then. It almost sounded like it was coming from inside his head.

When he tried to stand up to see if he could hear the noise in other parts of the room, he immediately fell to the ground. He felt sick like he was about to lose his dinner from last night. He barely had time to scramble to the bathroom before he was vomiting violently in the toilet. He felt better after he'd thrown up, but he still felt weak and shaky. Still, he didn't want to miss the Quidditch game, so he forced himself to get dressed and head down to breakfast.

Harry was picking at his breakfast as he always did on Quidditch mornings, barely eating more than one egg and a piece of toast. Regulus plopped down onto the bench beside him and the three of them looked up at him.

"You don't look so good, mate," Ron said uneasily.

"Yes, thank you," Regulus answered sardonically. "Just what I want to hear in the morning."

"We're just worried about you," Hermione defended.

"I know, I know," Regulus mumbled. "Are you nervous about the game?" He directed the question toward Harry, trying to move the subject away from him.

Harry shrugged. "Not really, I mean it's just Hufflepuff," he said with a slight chuckle. Regulus and Ron laughed along. The rest of breakfast passed quickly and soon enough they were all heading out of the Great Hall to head toward the Quidditch Pitch.

They were barely out of the door when Harry shouted in alarm. Regulus turned to look at him, already pulling his wand. "The voice. I just heard it again - didn't you?" He said frantically.

"No, I didn't hear anything," Regulus answered. Ron shook his head as well, but Hermione's eyes widened suddenly, and she slapped her hand across her forehead.

"Harry, I think I've just understood something. I have to go to the library," she said. Without waiting for anyone to reply, she took off running.

"What was that about?" Ron mumbled. Regulus shook his head in confusion before leaning up against the wall. He was so tired. He felt like his bones were about to be crushed under his own exhaustion.

"Are you okay?" Harry said anxiously. It was only then that Regulus realized that he was sliding down the wall toward the floor. He straightened out his legs to stay upright, but his vision grew blurry as he did so.

"I'm fine," Regulus muttered.

"You'd better hurry," Ron said. "It's almost eleven. You go, I'll take Regulus to the Hospital Wing." Regulus waved him off.

"You two go, I think I just need to lie down," he said, giving up on his plan to watch Harry play.

"Are you sure you can make it on your own?" Harry asked.

"Yes, yes," Regulus said. "Just go on, you don't want to be late for the game." Ron and Harry watched him as he slowly walked off.

*James's hands were so warm against Regulus's bare skin. His lips glided along Regulus's collarbones, nipping with his teeth every few minutes making Regulus squirm in his grasp. His large, warm hands glided up Regulus's sides, gripping him tightly before letting go, so he could go back to exploring. His fingers were rough from years of Quidditch, but they felt soft against his skin. Regulus couldn't believe that only a bit ago those fingers had been inside him. He shook away the thought, just the memory of what they'd just done made him blush.*

*"As much as I'm enjoying this," he mumbled, "I think we should probably wrap it up soon." James lifted his head to look at Regulus. His eyes were lidded, the hazel color swirling around like a pond of greens, blues, golds, and browns. He had a soft smile on his puffy lips.*

*“And why is that?” James asked. Regulus gestured to the room around them. They were currently in James’s bed in the Gryffindor dorm. James looked around, the satisfied smile still adorning his face.*

*“Aren’t you worried that someone might come in?” Regulus asked. “You know, like your very notable dormmate that just so happens to be my disowned brother?” James chuckled and kissed Regulus again.*

*Regulus was lost for a long few minutes after that. Enjoying the way James rolled his tongue into his mouth, exploring and conquering as he went. James rested his body on top of Regulus, propping himself up by his elbows. James’s skin was always so hot like he’d been crafted by the sun specifically to warm Regulus from the inside out. Regulus felt like he was always cold like there was always a slight chill that ran along his skin, but when James touched him he felt alive, he felt whole.*

*With James covering him, Regulus was adrift in a sea of sensations. James with his soft, pouty lips, his deft tongue, his strong fingers, all while the rest of his body ground along Regulus’s. Regulus groaned into his mouth, tangling his fingers in James’s hair and tugging on it intermittently. James hummed with approval, letting his hand wander down to the space between Regulus’s legs.*

*Regulus gripped his forearm to stop him. “Wait,” he said. James froze and pulled back to look at him. “Let’s at least lock the door.”*

*James looked confused, his brow furrowed questioningly. “Why didn’t we lock the door?” He looked back at the door in question, then back at Regulus. Something was tugging at the strings of Regulus’s thoughts, but Regulus couldn’t quite grasp it.*

*“I - I don’t remember,” Regulus mumbled. He kissed James again, just a gentle peck against the lips, a soft movement based more on instinct than any real choice to do so. “But we forgot, didn’t we? There was a reason we’d forgotten.” He couldn’t make his words make sense. James watched him carefully.*

*“This is strange isn’t it?” James said after a long moment of silence. He brought one hand up to dust it over Regulus’s collar bones, a tender and loving motion. After a second, he looked down at his own hand and then back up at Regulus’s face in wonder.*

*“What?” Regulus asked, too distracted by the feel of James’s hands to remember what they were talking about. James reached up and cupped Regulus’s cheek.*

*“It feels so good to touch you,” James said softly. “I’ve missed you.”*

*“Missed me?” Regulus asked. “Where have I been?” James looked lost again, but Regulus leaned forward to kiss the look off of his face. James let him, falling back into their movements with a practiced ease.*

*He leaned back again after a few long minutes. His eyes were dazed again like he’d just woken up and remembered that Regulus slept over. “Something is wrong, right?” He said*

*then looked confused as if he hadn't meant to say it. It took a second, but his face followed his words, looking more awake and aware. "Something is wrong."*

*"What could possibly be wrong?" Regulus said gently, reaching up to run his fingers through James's hair again. James stopped him, gripping his fingers tightly. "What?" Regulus asked.*

*"Why are we here?" James asked. He looked so worried. Regulus hated when he looked worried, it made him feel sick, like he was missing something.*

*"What? In your bed?" Regulus said with a light chuckle. "I would think you would remember inviting me here."*

*"No," James said. "I didn't invite you here." Regulus pulled his hand away, disentangling it from James's.*

*"What do you mean?" Regulus asked, mildly offended.*

*"To the dorm," James clarified. "I never invited you to the dorm. Why are we in the Gryffindor dorms?"*

*"I -" Regulus paused. "I don't remember, wasn't Sirius busy with something? You were able to get away?"*

*"Right, he was sneaking to Hogsmeade with Remus," James said. "But we weren't here, you never wanted to come here. We were in the Slytherin dorm."*

*"But how?" Regulus said vaguely, looking around the room.*

*"I imagined you here so many times, wrapped in my bedding," James said, his voice growing husky despite his obvious worry, "but now... it seems off."*

*"James darling," Regulus said. James turned to look at him. "I don't know what you're talking about. Everything is fine." He tried to sound reassuring, but from the way James's face fell, he wasn't sure he succeeded.*

*"No, Regulus - "*

*"Okay, enough is enough. I think we need to get Pomfrey or McGonagall, he's been asleep way too long, and I couldn't wake him earlier when I tried to." A voice cut through his dream like a hot knife, destroying the memory of James lounging on top of him.*

*"I think you're right," another voice said solemnly. Ron, Regulus's thoughts finally caught up.*

*"What's going on?" Regulus tried to ask, but all that came out was a muffled groaning noise.*

*"Regulus?" Harry's voice was suddenly right next to him. The worry was so intense that he sounded almost like he was crying. "Ron, go get someone."*

*"Wait," Regulus managed to say, "m okay," he mumbled.*

“You’re clearly not,” Harry said fiercely. Regulus used every ounce of energy he had to roll over and look at the two boys. They both looked so distraught that Regulus suddenly felt like he was missing something.

“What’s going on?” He asked, doing his best to sit up.

“What’s going on is that you’ve been asleep for two days!” Harry yelled. Regulus flinched at the noise. “And Hermione was... and Dumbledore and Hagrid...” he kept cutting off to take a deep panicked breath. Ron was watching him with a twisted look of distress seeming like he was stuck between trying to answer Regulus and trying to calm Harry down. Harry on the other hand was rapidly heading toward hyperventilation.

“Calm down, okay?” Regulus said gently. He stood up slowly, his legs shaking beneath him. This seemed only to stress Harry out more, but Regulus grabbed him by the shoulders and made him sit on the bed. It took a few long moments, but eventually, Harry got his breathing under control enough to speak. “Tell me what happened,” Regulus said. “Just start from the beginning.”

“Hermione was petrified,” Harry said and Regulus felt the buzz of anxiety that both of them must have been experiencing.

“How? When?” Regulus said quietly.

“It was right before the Quidditch game,” Ron answered as he took a seat on the bed next to Harry. “It was canceled and then McGonagall showed us Hermione. She said it happened right outside of the library, her and another student, Penelope Clearwater.”

“Then we tried to come back here and tell you, because McGonagall didn’t know where you were, but every time we tried to wake you it wouldn’t work,” Harry said.

“So we decided to go and confront Hagrid without you,” Ron said. “You know, because we agreed to ask him if anyone else was petrified.”

“Oh Merlin,” Regulus mumbled.

“But we didn’t get to question him,” Harry said. “Because the Minister for Magic came in and took him to Azkaban!”

“What?” Regulus yelled, looking between them.

“He said that he had to, because of last time, and then Malfoy’s dad came in and had Dumbledore removed from the school.”

“Lucius was here?” Regulus asked. Both of the boys nodded. “Wait, so Hagrid and Dumbledore are both gone?”

“Yes!” Both of them yelled frantically.

“Okay, wait, wait, tell me again what happened,” he said slowly, trying to organize his overwrought thoughts. They both looked stressed and vaguely irritated. “Don’t leave out any

details.”

# the missing boys.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was something very wrong at Hogwarts. Of course, Regulus knew this and had known this all year, but now Hermione had been petrified and Dumbledore and Hagrid were removed, Regulus was about to lose his mind. He kept thinking about Hagrid's asinine advice to just *follow the spiders*. Or Dumbledore's vague *help will always be given at Hogwarts for those who ask for it*.

Regulus couldn't be bothered to decipher either of these things though. He was too frustrated with the situation. They weren't able to visit Hermione after Madam Pomfrey secluded the Hospital Wing off, so only patients were allowed in. Professors were now chaperoning them from one class to the next. The only good thing that came from the last attacks was that everyone seemed to agree that Harry would never purposefully hurt his friend so there was no way he was the heir. They were in Herbology when Regulus overheard Ernie apologizing to Harry for ever suspecting him.

"Look," Harry said suddenly, nudging Regulus in the arm. Regulus and Ron both looked over to see a line of spiders walking away from them.

"Oh, yeah," Ron said uneasily. Harry had become obsessed with finding spiders to follow, but it was clear that Ron was less than thrilled about the prospect. "Too bad we can't follow them now." His voice was deceptively cheery, despite his apparent disappointment.

"It looks like they're heading into the Forbidden Forest," Harry pondered.

"We are not going into the Forbidden Forest," Regulus said fiercely. They both looked at him in alarm. Harry looked slightly peeved, but Ron just seemed relieved. "Neither of you is going anywhere near that forest, do you hear me?"

"Why not?" Harry demanded.

"Do you not remember what happened last time? The person who was hanging around in that forest?" Regulus asked.

"Well, he's probably not still there, right?" Ron said though he looked truly unwilling to argue against Regulus.

"We don't know that. Not to mention there are an immense amount of dangerous and deadly creatures that live in the forest. Promise me you will not go in there."

"We have to help Hagrid," Harry said. "He's in Azkaban right now!" Regulus did his best not to think about Hagrid in that place, locked up in the same prison as his traitor brother.



“Then write a letter to Dumbledore,” Regulus said. Harry opened his mouth to interrupt, but Regulus continued on speaking. “Even though he is not currently headmaster, he can still help, and I doubt he wants Hagrid to stay in Azkaban longer than he has to.”

“Fine,” Harry grumbled, finally letting the spiders go. Regulus wasn’t fooled, he knew they would have to talk about it again soon, but at least for now, Harry didn’t seem like he was planning to sneak out of class and scamper off into the forest.

That evening, the boys went to bed shortly after having dinner. The common room was always packed now with the curfew. Regulus still hadn’t written in the diary, but still kept the item close at hand. That night he tucked himself in early and closed his curtains, before falling asleep almost immediately.

He woke later to an eerie feeling trickling down his neck. Something was wrong, he was sure of it. He opened the curtains to see that it was still nighttime, he’d likely only been asleep for a few hours at most. Upon scanning the room, he quickly noticed that both Harry and Ron were not in their beds. Reacting instinctively, he stood up and started rummaging through his trunk. It didn’t take him long to realize that Harry’s invisibility cloak was missing.

Regulus struggled to contain his frustration, knowing that he couldn’t risk waking the other boys and potentially getting Ron and Harry expelled for being out of bed late. He quickly donned a Weasley sweater and a pair of shoes, determined to sneak out of the castle to locate both of his friends. They were no doubt in the Forbidden Forest and who knows what could happen to them out there. He felt angry and frustrated, but more than that he felt embarrassed, with both of them sneaking out without him even noticing, or realizing they would do such a thing.

Regulus cast a quick Disillusionment charm on himself right before he left the common room, but it was barely necessary considering the corridors were barren this time of night. Regulus made his way urgently through the castle, moving as swiftly and quietly as possible. The weight of anxiety was palpable, threatening to overwhelm him completely. He was nearly at the Entrance Hall when he saw his first person. He heard footsteps echoing not far off and slid up against the wall so that he could blend in. Disillusionment charms weren’t perfect and someone would definitely see him if he was moving around.

While he stood there, his mind raced with possibilities. He thought it might be a teacher or maybe a prefect, though it was well past the time that they would be doing rounds, he was surprised when a little blonde head came around the corner.

“Draco?” He called out without thinking. Draco turned to look at him, and Regulus immediately knew something was wrong.

“Who’s there?” Draco said, his voice was scratchy like he’d been screaming. He almost looked normal if it wasn’t for his eyes. His usually gray eyes were now a molten silver and the whites had an odd sheen to them. It reminded Regulus of the few times he’d seen a corpse during his time as a Death Eater. He remembers when Bellatrix killed a muggle family of three and lined them all up on the floor before lighting their house on fire. Regulus had stared into the face of a young man whose eyes were caught open in surprise, the emptiness haunting Regulus for weeks after that.

Seeing Draco now gave him a similar feeling, though it was clear Draco was still alive, his eyes made Regulus shiver uncomfortably. Draco was looking around frantically, and Regulus finally remembered that he was still disillusioned. He cast a quick *finite*, and Draco jolted in surprise when Regulus appeared before him.

“What are you doing out here?” Regulus said.

“I’m...” Draco trailed off and a terribly confused look crossed his face. “I can’t remember, I’m...” While he was speaking, the glazed appearance faded from his eyes, but as his sentence trailed off, the odd look came back more intensely than before. Regulus watched as Draco’s face morphed from one of confusion to one of anxiety and worry. He turned on his heel and started walking briskly back down the hallway.

Regulus reached out and grabbed onto Draco’s arm to stop him. “Where are you going?” He said, trying to make him turn around. Draco ripped his arm out of Regulus’s grasp with far more strength than Regulus expected a twelve-year-old to have. “Draco, stop,” he whispered furiously.

Draco turned to look at him and an odd noise came out of his mouth, almost like a hiss, before the confusion was back again. “I have to go,” he mumbled and tried to turn away again, but it was clear that he wasn’t sure where he was headed. “He... I think... something is wrong... I don’t know.”

Draco stumbled then, tripping over his own feet and veering off to the side until his shoulder slammed into the wall. Regulus ran to catch him before he crashed to the ground. His skin was covered in a sheen of sweat and his eyes had gone so white and silver that he looked possessed.

“All right, it’s okay. Let me take you up to the Hospital Wing,” Regulus said quietly. Draco gave a shaky nod and let Regulus help him stand. Regulus threw one of Draco’s arms around his shoulders and started the long trek up from the Entrance Hall to the Hospital Wing. It took them a while to get there, with Draco constantly stumbling or randomly trying to turn and walk in a different direction, but eventually, they made it to the doors.

Madam Pomfrey was on them the moment they walked into the room. Fussing over Draco and casting spell after spell trying to figure out what was wrong. It was clear that the boy had a very high fever and the confusion and frantic mumblings were getting worse. Regulus was hoping that she was distracted enough to not notice him, but as he was trying to slip out of the Wing, she turned to him with an intense look on her face.

“Where do you think you’re going? You can’t walk around the halls without a chaperone,” she said and all but manhandled him back into the center of the room.

“Sorry. I was just dropping Draco off,” he explained.

“Why were you out of bed to begin with?” She asked, which was unusual. Madam Pomfrey was typically no one to pry if she knew you were breaking the rules, but it was clear that the stress of the year was weighing on her. She had dark circles under her eyes like she hadn’t been sleeping, and her deep-set wrinkles seemed even more intense in the dark light.

"I was just, well, I was," Regulus stumbled over his words, not prepared with an excuse. Madam Pomfrey gave him a very long look before shuffling off. She came back with a couple of different potions just in time to catch Draco trying to leave again. She all but forced the potions down his throat and in only a few minutes Draco was sleeping peacefully in one of the beds. The petrified students were tucked behind closed curtains, which Regulus was glad for, he didn't think he wanted to see Hermione.

She came back and handed a sleeping draught to him as well as one of the potions that were meant to help heal his magical core just in time for the doors to open. McGonagall entered looking put out and exhausted, still dressed in her sleeping attire.

"Professor, would you mind escorting Mr. Black back to his common room? I do not have the beds to keep him here tonight, and he is well enough to go back," Madam Pomfrey said quickly. Regulus's eyebrows raised in surprise, he was sure he was about to get in trouble and had not expected her to cover for him. McGonagall looked just as surprised but nodded and motioned for Regulus to follow her.

They walked back to Gryffindor Tower in silence and when he made it to the common room, she said the password and sent him off without so much as a passing goodbye. It was overall a very strange interaction, but Regulus wasn't about to question it. Of course, now he would have to make his way back outside to try and find Harry and Ron, but at least he hadn't been expelled.

There was no need for him to worry about Harry or Ron as he was only in the common room for a short while before the portrait swung open and footsteps could be heard entering. He couldn't actually see anyone, which was more damning than anything really. He heard the footsteps stop the moment they were properly in the common room, no doubt having caught sight of Regulus standing there.

"*Ventum*," Regulus said quietly. A gust of wind burst out of his wand, causing the invisibility cloak to flutter over their heads. It was evident that neither of them had a firm grip on it. "What in Merlin's name do you think you're doing?" He hadn't intended to yell, but his voice was so loud that it echoed slightly.

The two boys appeared stunned, with pale and drawn faces. Regulus couldn't determine whether it was due to the recent events or his outburst toward them. Regardless, he was too furious to take notice.

"We can explain," Harry said quickly.

"Well then," Regulus said through clenched teeth, "you better start explaining." Both of them were still frozen in place and failed to respond right away. "Now!"

"What's going on?" A voice pulled all of their attention away. Regulus looked up to see Neville walking down the stairs toward them, sleepily rubbing his eyes. "I woke up and all of you were out of bed," he explained. "I heard yelling."

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but Regulus cut him off. "Nothing is going on. Go back to bed." Neville took in his face and must have decided it wasn't worth arguing. With a

sympathetic glance toward Ron and Harry, Neville turned tail and ran back up to the dorm. Ron and Harry both looked even more apprehensive now if such a thing was even possible. "Now," Regulus said, "tell me where the two of you have been."

He should have expected this honestly. Both of them sneaking off to go follow a line of spiders into an extremely dangerous, expressly forbidden forest, right after Regulus told them not. He wasn't even sure why he bothered anymore when it was clear Harry was going to do exactly what he set his mind to. Still, Regulus was incensed. He cast the strongest silencing spell around the three of them that he could before opening his mouth to respond.

"I cannot believe you two are this stupid," he said. They had taken a seat on the couch and up until a moment ago, Regulus was sitting on a chair next to them. Now, he was pacing back and forth before them with his arms gesturing wildly. "Actually, no I can believe it. You could have been killed. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, but - " Harry started to say but Regulus sent him a look so venomous that he slammed his mouth closed with a loud click.

"Can you imagine what would have happened if you died? No one would know where you were, no one would have ever found you after your bodies were completely consumed by Acromantulas."

"Oh Merlin," Ron mumbled. His skin was a pale green like he was about to be sick.

"I was the only one who knew you were thinking of going out there, but even I wouldn't be able to find you. Can you imagine Hermione being cured and waking up to find that both of her friends had been brutally killed and eaten?" He was properly screaming now, and yes, perhaps laying it on a bit thick, but he couldn't stop now.

"But we weren't," Harry argued.

"Imagine how your parents would feel," Regulus said, directing the statement to Ron and ignoring Harry's statement altogether. "Imagine how your brothers or Ginny would feel knowing they were sleeping away while you were out dying in the forest. Except they wouldn't even know you were dead, would they? Because you would never be found!" Ron looked like he was about a minute from vomiting.

"Okay, we get it," Harry said sulkily.

"And you!" Regulus responded, turning his angry eyes on Harry. Harry looked more annoyed than anything like this was all just a boring task he had to complete before he was finally allowed to go to bed. "Your parents died to protect you, did you know that?"

Harry noticeably paled, though his facial expression didn't change. "Yes," he mumbled.

"They died so that you could survive, and you were willing to throw it all away so that you could hunt down a few man-eating spiders, just so you could do what exactly?"

“We were trying to help Hagrid,” Harry said, his voice growing angry and desperate. “We weren’t about to just leave him in prison like you were going to.” Harry looked regretful the moment the words crossed his lips.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Regulus whispered, deadly quiet.

“Just that... you always want to stay out of it, but no one else is trying to help. We can’t just sit around and do nothing,” Harry said, looking at his hands the whole time.

“Not everything is your responsibility, Harry,” Regulus said after a long moment. The words had made him think of Sirius, rotting away in Azkaban. He knew Sirius deserved it, he knew he did, but there was always a part of him that felt the insane desire to help him, to help him escape, or at least put him out of his misery. There was no way Harry could know about that, but the feeling was still there when Harry accused him of just leaving someone in prison.

“You are a kid. Your responsibility is to learn and grow up safely, that’s it.”

Harry looked at him with a strange misty-eyed expression. “But no one else will help if I don’t,” he said.

Regulus knelt down in front of him, placing his hands on Harry’s shoulders. “Yes, they will. Don’t you remember what Dumbledore said?” Regulus said. He couldn’t believe he was quoting the old man. “You just have to ask. I would have helped you, or I would have found a way to contact someone who was much better equipped to deal with this problem. You don’t need to throw yourself at danger the moment it appears. There are a lot of people who would be very hurt if something happened to you.”

Harry looked miserable for a second, and Regulus was keenly aware that he was struggling to contain his emotions and hold back tears. Ron, too, seemed taken aback by the situation, though he seemed to agree with Regulus.

Regulus had never been a very tactile person in his first life. Even now he tended to separate himself from others, holding them at a distance. The only person he ever felt at ease touching was James, though this sentiment does not extend to anyone he knows presently. However, seeing Harry with his teary eyes like he’d never once had someone confirm they cared about him made Regulus abandon all his typical rules.

He pulled Harry in and wrapped his arms tightly around him. Harry immediately hugged him back, tucking his head in on Regulus’s shoulder. Ron looked on with a gentle smile before leaning in to join them, and the three of them stayed huddled together for a while before finally separating.

“Tomorrow we will write a letter to Dumbledore and tell him what you found out. I think it’s best that we don’t tell McGonagall for now, who knows how she’ll react when she hears about your Forbidden Forest adventures,” Regulus said. Ron and Harry both nodded. “For now, let’s go to bed. It’s already late and I’m sure I’ve permanently scarred Neville.” The other two chuckled as they made their way up to bed.

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They wrote a letter before heading to breakfast the next morning and attached it to one of the school owls who came in to drop something off. They weren't allowed to go to the Owlery on their own anymore, so they had limited options. They told him about what Aragog had said, that Hagrid was innocent, at least of opening the Chamber of Secrets and killing a student, though maybe not totally innocent, considering he was keeping a man-eating spider in the castle.

Early in the morning, Harry brought up the idea that Aragog might have been referring to Moaning Myrtle as the deceased girl in the bathroom. However, due to their current situation, they couldn't discuss it with her. It was impossible to escape their chaperones, and requesting supervision to visit the girls' bathroom would undoubtedly draw suspicion.

Harry seemed calmer though which in turn made Regulus feel calmer. Unfortunately, their morning was dampened when McGonagall announced that exams would begin in a little over a week. A few days later, McGonagall announced that the petrified students would be restored that night. Regulus and the other boys were relieved to hear that Hermione would be back with them soon.

Regulus wasn't sure why, but that morning he started to feel ill again. He'd been feeling better, though not completely well, he still felt like his energy was restored. However, after the announcement he started feeling a depletion of his energy.

"I think we can sneak away from Lockhart to talk to Moaning Myrtle," Harry whispered to them at breakfast. "I know, I don't have to do everything, but we're just going to talk to her."

"Yes, fine," Regulus answered. "I don't see the harm in speaking to her."

Harry was right of course. Lockhart let them wander off only a few corridors away from their next class. Regulus was planning to go with them originally, but the drain on his energy had grown to an unbearable weight.

"I think I'm going to sneak back to the dorm," he said.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked worriedly.

"I'm fine, just tired I think," Regulus answered. Harry didn't look convinced, but he was still determined to use their free moment to speak with Myrtle and had no choice but to let Regulus go.

Regulus knew it wasn't the best idea to leave the boys to wander alone given the state of things, but his thoughts were becoming so hazy and sluggish that he was having trouble remembering why. He made it to the dorm in no time and immediately curled up in bed. However, a nagging sensation kept him awake, preventing him from falling asleep.

Why did Tom Riddle tell Harry that Hagrid was the one expelled? Why not tell Regulus? There must have been a reason why he kept that piece of information from Regulus specifically. If Regulus knew that detail, he might have reached out to Hagrid much earlier in

the year. By the time Harry learned that detail, he was more worried about keeping Harry away from him than continuing his research into the location of the Chamber. Something was wrong with Tom, there was no doubt about that, and Regulus needed to know what.

“I know that Hagrid was innocent,” he wrote right after pulling out the diary.

## Chapter End Notes

nooo reggie don't write in the diary, you're so sexy haha

# the basilisk.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*“Not all of us have the option of running away,” Regulus spat.*

*“I would have helped you,” James responded desperately. “I can still help you.”*

*“It’s too late, James,” Regulus replied. He watched James’s face fall at his words, the regret he’d felt for months now threatening to boil up and drown him.*

*“Please don’t say that,” James whispered. “Don’t say that. Reg, please, I -” James cut off suddenly, his face transformed into one of bewilderment. “I don’t remember it snowing during this.”*

*As Regulus turned his head to look behind him, he came to the realization that James was indeed correct - delicate snowflakes were descending down from the sky. They were up on the Astronomy Tower; just as he remembered, but now the snow was slowly falling, already sticking to the lands beyond the castle.*

*“How odd,” Regulus muttered. He should have realized it was snowing given the way an intense chill was starting to wrap around him.*

*“This happened in October,” James said behind him. “Too early for snow, wasn’t it?” Regulus suddenly shivered, his body trembling uncontrollably. James came up and immediately wrapped his strong, warm arms around Regulus’s body. Regulus tried to relax back into him, but the cold had settled so deep in his bones that even James’s warmth couldn’t chase it away.*

*“It’s so cold,” Regulus said. As the words left his mouth, the snow began to pick up, falling harder and pushing into their place of cover, so that his clothes and hair were growing wet.*

*“I don’t think these are my memories,” James said. Regulus turned in his arms to look at him properly.*

*“What do you mean?” Regulus asked.*

*“I thought they were mine at first, that something was happening to me to make me relive these moments. I can’t remember though. I can’t remember what was happening before. But the memories are changing, and it’s not me doing it.”*

*“How do you know?” Regulus replied. “That it isn’t you changing them.”*

*“Because I’m not getting cold,” James said somberly. “Or wet for that matter.” Regulus looks at James, dressed in his school uniform still, though he looks older for some reason, and despite the relentless onslaught of snow, James managed to remain completely dry. His attire seemed impervious to the elements, and his hair remained completely untouched.*



*“So it’s me, I’m affecting them,” Regulus mumbled. He wished James could warm him, could keep him dry too.*

*“What’s going on? How is this happening?” James asked carefully like he was afraid of the answer. Regulus understood though, he was afraid to tell him, but he felt he had no choice. Besides, if there was anyone he always trusted, it was James.*

*“You died, James,” Regulus said. James jolted in surprise and pulled back slightly. “No, no please,” Regulus begged, trying to hold onto the slight warmth James still offered. James surrendered and let Regulus pull him back in.*

*“What do you mean? I died?” James asked.*

*“You’re dead, you died. I don’t know how you’re here, in my dreams, maybe I’m just imagining it.” Regulus tried to explain, but he wasn’t sure how well he was managing it. James was quiet for a long moment, but Regulus didn’t fill the silence, instead, he let James process what he said.*

*“Oh, that’s right,” James said finally. “It was You-Know-Who, wasn’t it? He came to kill Harry. Oh no, Harry!” James really does pull back now, detaching himself from Regulus completely.*

*“He’s alive,” Regulus said quickly. James immediately calms. “He survived.”*

*“Did Lily?” James asked, though he must already know the answer from how he asked the question. Regulus shook his head regretfully.*

*“I’m sorry,” Regulus said. James nodded and, thankfully, brought his arms back to wrap them around Regulus.*

*“Are you dead too?” James asked. “I thought... I thought I remembered grieving.” Regulus didn’t think he could manage hearing James recount how he felt after Regulus died. He knew by the time he was gone that James had moved on and didn’t care about him, but he couldn’t bear to have it confirmed.*

*“No, it’s complicated. But no, I’m alive,” Regulus replied quickly. James seemed to understand his desire not to dwell on it and fell silent. They stood wrapped around each other as the snow continued to fall. It seemed to be growing faster, drenching Regulus more and more. He was shaking, violently now, his teeth chattering together.*

*“How do you know what the Gryffindor dormitories look like?” James asked suddenly.*

*“What?” Regulus asked, quirking his head in confusion.*

*“We were in the dorms last time, but to my knowledge, you never visited my dorm. It seems strange that you would know what they looked like in so much detail. Or did I make them look that way?” James seemed to be having trouble articulating his point, but Regulus understood regardless.*

*"It's very complicated," Regulus said with a laugh, "but I'm in Gryffindor now. I spend most of the year in the dorms." James looked baffled before letting out a loud laugh.*

*"This is so confusing," James said, though laughter was still in his voice.*

*"I know, I'm sorry," Regulus said apologetically. He could barely speak now, the cold draining him at an alarming rate. James's face morphed into one of concern.*

*"What is happening to you, Reg?" James whispered.*

*"I don't know," Regulus answered honestly. "I think I might be dying again."*

*"Again?" James asked alarmed. Regulus shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind. He didn't intend to utter those words.*

*"It's not so bad," Regulus amended. "I don't think I mind as much this time. Last time, I was so afraid and so lonely, but if you're here with me, then it can't be that bad."*

*"No," James shouted, pulling away. "You can't die, why are you saying all of this?"*

*"It's okay, James. I'm okay," Regulus said gently. Or as gently as he could given his shivering frame.*

*"I think..." James paused, looking around frantically like the answer would just appear to him if he looked hard enough. "I think you need to wake up. I think you need to open your eyes."*

*"Why?" Regulus asked. He was swaying dangerously now and desperately wished James would hold him again. Dying wasn't so bad if James had his arms around him.*

*"Where are you?" James asked, spinning in a full circle. His eyes moved around wildly like he was seeing something Regulus wasn't. "I don't recognize this place."*

*Regulus looked around as well, but his location hadn't changed. He was still at the top of the Astronomy Tower. Heavy snow was still falling. It was almost peaceful, if it wasn't for the dreadful cold seeping into him, consuming him whole. It reminded him of his seventh year when he would frequent the Astronomy Tower throughout the winter, just watching the snowfall, wishing he could be like white flakes, wishing he could let himself fall from the sky as they did.*

*He remembered Pandora finding him more often than not, she always seemed to know when he was feeling at his worst, and she would show up and sit silently beside him just to remind him he wasn't alone. He wished she was still alive. He wondered what she would have to say to him after all these years. He felt oddly regretful that he didn't spend more time with Luna that year. It was clear that Luna didn't have many other friends, yet Regulus still let himself avoid her. It was too late now, of course, with death claiming him.*

*James was still looking around frantically, but he finally seemed to settle back on Regulus. When he laid eyes on Regulus's shivering form, his face shifted into one of tender worry. He opened his arms and let Regulus fall against his chest. He didn't feel warm anymore though.*

*He didn't feel like anything. Regulus hadn't expected the sob that crawled its way out of him, so he had no way of stopping it.*

*"Oh, darling," James said softly. "Just open your eyes, please. Just fight. I don't want you to die."*

*"I miss you," Regulus mumbled in reply. "I don't want to be alone anymore."*

*James sighed softly before chuckling slightly. "You're not," James said suddenly. Regulus lifted his head to look at him, but it was too late. James's sweet, soft face was ripped from him, the world around him melting into nothingness.*

"Please wake up, Regulus. Please."

"James?" Regulus muttered. He felt like he hadn't spoken in a long time like he'd been sleeping for years and years. His eyes were just barely opened, so it took a long moment for him to realize the kind bespectacled boy he was looking at was not his James. "Harry," he said lightly.

Harry looked disheveled. His curly and unruly hair was partially wet, drenched down, and sticking to the side of his face. The other side was still dry, shooting out in several different directions. His glasses were lopsided and one lens was cracked. He was covered in dirt and what looked like blood.

This last detail brought Regulus firmly back into the present. He shot up as fast as he could, but his head spun, and Harry had to reach out to steady him. They were sitting on a cold, wet stone floor.

"What happened? What's going on?" Regulus asked frantically. He couldn't bring himself to look away from Harry's distraught face.

"It's okay," Harry said. "It's fine." Harry paused for a moment, looking torn, before he threw his arms out and hugged Regulus tighter than Regulus had ever been hugged. Regulus felt the wind get knocked out of his lungs, but reached up to hug Harry back. His frozen fingers were slowly gaining feeling again, and he could tell that Harry was practically drenched in liquid. He pulled his hands away to see they were red and blotchy.

"Is this blood?" Regulus asked, pleased that his voice didn't shake too much.

"It's not mine," Harry said, finally pulling away. "At least, for the most part." He finally gestured off to the side and when Regulus followed his hand, he swore he felt his soul leave his body. The body of a humongous snake was laid out on the ground next to them. They appeared to be in some strange stone room with a huge statue of a man.

Regulus didn't even realize he was moving until he felt Harry fighting against him. "Harry, what?" He said frantically.

"It's fine! It's fine!" Harry shouted. "It's dead, I killed it."

"You killed - you killed it?" Regulus replied. "What is it?"

“A basilisk,” Harry said. “What do you remember?” Regulus looked at Harry and tried his best to search his memories.

“I don’t know. Where are we?” Regulus said, trying his best to organize his thoughts.

“The Chamber of Secrets,” Harry said with a sigh.

“What?” Regulus shouted and now he was properly up on his feet. He felt stronger than he did a moment ago, less tired, and less cold. Harry stood with him. “How?”

“It was Voldemort,” Harry said. Regulus flinched so badly that he almost fell over. “Sorry,” Harry mumbled.

“What was Vo — the Dark Lord?” Regulus asked.

“Tom Riddle, in the diary,” Harry said. Regulus felt like he was going to faint. “He was using you to open the Chamber and release the basilisk.” Regulus looked at him with explicit horror. “I know you said not to throw myself at danger, but you were going to die and no one knew how to find you. I had to come.”

“I’m confused,” Regulus mumbled.

“Tom was using the diary to possess you. He was using you to open the Chamber,” Harry explained.

“I was the one opening the Chamber of Secrets?” Regulus yelled. His voice echoed in the wide-open stone room. Harry cringed slightly, before nodding, though the motion looked like it hurt him.

*I am doing a terrible job of protecting Harry*, was Regulus's first thought. It drowned out nearly all other thoughts in his head.

“Listen, I’ll explain everything, but I think we should get out first,” Harry explained. Regulus nodded numbly and let Harry drag him from the Chamber. He watched Harry grab something off the ground, but he was too distracted to pay attention.

They made their way through a set of half-crumbled caves before they came upon Ron and Lockhart.

“Regulus, thank Merlin, I’m so glad you’re okay,” Ron said quickly. He was also covered in dirt and was hurriedly shoveling rocks out of the way, so Harry and Regulus could pass through. Lockhart looked like he was half-heartedly helping, but did not acknowledge Regulus.

Ron clapped Regulus on the back when they made it through, and Regulus gave him a wane smile. Harry was still holding tightly onto Regulus’s elbow, and Regulus realized how traumatized he must feel given what he had just been through. He couldn’t even imagine how the boy was feeling. The boy’s hand was steady, but his quietness made Regulus feel ill.

“Where did the bird come from? And where did you get a sword?” Ron said. Regulus hadn’t noticed either of these things but now realized that a large Phoenix was flittering around their heads before it came to land on Harry’s shoulder.

Regulus listened half-heartedly while Ron described a miscast memory charm that seemed to have removed all of Lockhart’s memories. After that, Fawkes, Regulus discovered was his name, flew them out of the Chamber and into Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom in no time. Regulus followed them in a daze to McGonagall’s office. Regulus was both surprised and not surprised to see Dumbledore standing in the office along with McGonagall. He had an indecipherable look on his face.

“How?” McGonagall asked puzzledly. Harry went forward and dropped the sword, and what Regulus now realized was Tom Riddle’s diary on the desk in front of her, before launching into the tale of what happened.

The fact that Regulus had been possessed by Tom Riddle, by the Dark Lord himself, made Regulus feel ill. It explained so much though. He now understood why he was so tired and drained all the time, and why he was losing time. He wondered if Tom had caused the dreams with James to occur. It seemed strange that James would fight back against the memories, but Regulus couldn’t make sense of it one way or the other.

“It was the diary,” Harry said, pulling Regulus from his thoughts. “Riddle wrote in it when he was sixteen.” Dumbledore seemed perplexed and terribly interested in the diary. Something was itching at Regulus like he was missing something, but for the moment he was too overwhelmed to grasp at it.

“Mr. Black, you should go up to the hospital wing right away,” Dumbledore said to him, acknowledging him for the first time since he entered the room. Harry opened his mouth like he was going to argue. “There will be no punishment. Older and wiser wizards than he have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort.”

Regulus felt the hot wash of shame move through him. He didn’t want to hear anymore. Harry was safe and for tonight, that was all that matter. He left almost immediately, not even hearing what else Dumbledore had to say. He walked numbly to the Hospital Wing and came in to find Madam Pomfrey bustling around.

“Oh,” she yelped when she saw him. “Thank Rowena, you’re alive. How?”

“It’s a long story,” Regulus mumbled. “Harry and Ron came for me.” She luckily did not make him elaborate further. She set him up in a bed near the door, but Regulus immediately asked for the curtains to be put up.

“May I have a Dreamless Sleep draught?” He asked politely. Madam Pomfrey looked unnerved for a second but nodded. “Would you mind — well, do you mind not letting anyone in to visit? At least for the time being?” She gave him a long, sad look, but eventually said yes.

Regulus dressed in the pajamas she provided, pulled the curtains tightly closed and took the potion. He’d failed worse than he’d ever failed before. For now, he needed to sleep. But when

he woke, he decided, he was going to leave Hogwarts for good.

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Regulus woke briefly the next morning. The sun was shining through the windows indicating that it was early morning. Regulus felt both more rested than he had all year and more exhausted than he'd ever been. He didn't think he could deal with what had happened just yet, so he pulled his blanket tight above his head and all but forced himself back into a deep sleep.

When he woke again it was nighttime, dark and quiet. The curtains were still pulled around his hospital bed, and he wondered if anyone had tried to visit him while he was out. He was slightly surprised that Madam Pomfrey hadn't bothered to wake him, but perhaps she knew how desperately he needed to not be awake.

He lay awake for a long time after that. It began to rain not long after he woke up, but it was nothing but a light drizzle. He used every trick he knew to keep from thinking about the Chamber and Tom and the basilisk. It was too much, far too much. He knew that at some point he would have to leave this bed and leave the Hospital Wing and leave Hogwarts, but he just wasn't ready to face it. He wondered if he could sneak out of the school without anyone noticing.

It was a long time before he eventually fell back asleep, his stomach rumbling from the many hours he'd spent without eating. He didn't even know how he could still be tired after so much sleep, but it was like his body knew what he was avoiding.

When he woke the next morning, he wasn't alone. The curtains were still drawn but he could sense someone in the Hospital Wing with him as though they were waiting for him to wake up. He lay very still trying to figure out if they would just leave, but he could feel the magic permeating throughout the room. Eventually, he sighed and gave up, standing up to pull the curtains back.

"Ah, Mr. Black, you're awake," Dumbledore said the moment the curtains were open. "How are you feeling?"

Regulus felt uneasy on his feet like he wasn't sure if he should be sitting back down or making a run for it for some unfathomable reason. "I'm... fine," he answered after a long moment's pause.

"I'm glad to hear it. I was hoping we could discuss what happened," Dumbledore said idly.

"I appreciate that you did not expel me in front of the others, but I assure you I am already planning to leave. I know that I've put the school in danger, but it was never my intention," Regulus said, using the highly formal voice that he was taught in childhood.

“That is unnecessary, Mr. Black,” Dumbledore responded. “I did mean it when I said there would be no punishment.”

“There should be a punishment,” Regulus replied, speaking much louder than he intended to. He did his best to lower his voice before continuing. “I put Harry in direct danger, not to mention Ron and whatever happened to Lockhart.”

“I don’t believe that’s a far statement,” Dumbledore said mildly. “As I understand it, it was not your fault that Tom possessed you. Unless, of course, you intended to use his diary to open the Chamber and rid the school of all its muggleborn students?”

“Of course not,” Regulus shouted. “But it’s still my fault. I wrote in the diary even though I could feel that something was wrong with it.” Regulus was trying not to let his voice echo through the empty Wing, but it was hard to fight the tidal wave of emotions he was experiencing.

“I was curious about that,” Dumbledore interrupted. Regulus took a step back, not even realizing that he’d stepped forward while speaking.

“Curious about what?” He asked, suddenly bone tired.

“Why did you write in the diary?” Dumbledore asked.

“It just,” Regulus paused and searched his memories. It was a complicated question to try and answer because even now looking back on it he couldn’t figure out why he’d made such a reckless decision to write in the diary. “I’m not sure. But Tom made it seem like he at least searched for the Chamber of Secrets during his time here at Hogwarts, and I was hoping that he would be able to help me. Of course, I did not realize that the reason he was looking for it was because he had the ability to open it.”

“What did he tell you?” Dumbledore asked after a long moment. Regulus told him everything he could remember, about stealing the diary from Ginny, about asking his mother’s portrait about Tom Riddle and the Chamber, about Tom’s time at school and the mention of the student dying, about losing the diary and Harry finding it in Myrtle’s bathroom, and about the memory Tom showed Harry.

“I should have asked about him, I kept thinking of coming to you. Tom mentioned that you were here at Hogwarts when he attended,” Regulus said. His voice was growing scratchy from use.

“I do believe that, if you had tried to contact me, Tom would have likely stopped you,” Dumbledore replied. Regulus jolted, he hadn’t even thought about that, but in retrospect it made sense. “Is there anything else about the diary?”

“No,” he said immediately but then stopped. There was one other thing that had weighed on him all year, something he’d never figured out. “I think it might have been making a noise.”

“A noise?” Dumbledore asked.

“Like a hissing. It sounded almost like Parseltongue. I did not even realize that’s what I was hearing until I heard Harry speak it. I had heard it before with... well, that’s not important exactly, but I think something in the school was making me hear it. I could not connect the dots before.” Regulus felt like he was downright sulking at this point. Talking out everything with another adult made him realize what a useless idiot he’d been the entire year. So many bad choices, one right after another, and the consequences had almost cost him everything.

Dumbledore, upon hearing his description of the hissing, had a knowing glint in his eyes. “Do you know what this diary is?” Dumbledore asked in that specific voice teachers used, the kind of voice that said, I already know, but I’m not going to tell you.

“I’m not sure. I don’t know how the Dark Lord could have hidden a memory of himself in a diary,” Regulus answered half-heartedly.

“Tom did not hide a memory,” Dumbledore responded. As he spoke he reached into his robe to pull out something. Regulus watched closely as the battered diary appeared. It had a large hole in the center of it, the sides pulling up in a grotesque imitation of a stab wound. “He hid his soul.”

Regulus gasped. He didn’t intend to, but the sound punched out of him in a hurry when he heard the word *soul*. Of course, it was his soul. Regulus should have known. Well, he should have done a lot of things. His soul, a Horcrux, Regulus had been writing in a Horcrux all year.

“So, you know what it is?” Dumbledore asked gently.

“I didn’t before, but yes,” Regulus responded, the formality slipping from his voice. Dumbledore gave him a nod indicating for him to go on. Regulus wondered if Dumbledore already knew exactly what the item was and if he knew what they were called. He wasn’t sure that the Horcrux would be shared in the circles Dumbledore ran in. Then again he was a very old and experienced wizard, so it wouldn’t be unheard of for him to already know. “It’s a Horcrux.”

Dumbledore looked surprised and keenly interested. “Destroyed by basilisk venom,” he mumbled. “Of course.”

“Basilisk venom,” Regulus repeated aloud. The solution he needed was at Hogwarts all along, and all he had to do was endanger the entire school and force a twelve-year-old to fight a giant and deadly snake.

“You seem more familiar with this than I believed you would be,” Dumbledore said.

“I have been researching them,” Regulus answered vaguely. Dumbledore gave him a knowing look but surprisingly did not press him.

“I believe it would be prudent for us to work together,” Dumbledore finally replied. Regulus reluctantly agreed. Though there was a part of him that didn’t trust the wizard, he felt he had no choice in the matter now. Not to mention how spectacularly things went wrong when he was on his own.



“I have some research on the subject I can share,” Regulus said.

“Is it still your intention to leave Hogwarts?” Dumbledore asked. He stood and, to Regulus’s surprise, handed off the diary. Regulus grabbed it and cradled it between his hands. It felt so light and powerless. It must have been feeding off of him all year, and he wasn’t even aware. The self-hatred threatened to swallow him again, but he did his best to focus on replying to Dumbledore’s question.

“I think that would be best,” Regulus mumbled regretfully. “I wanted to help Harry, to protect him, but all I’ve done is put him in further danger. I think it might be best if I help him from afar.”

Dumbledore gave him a long look. Regulus thought for a moment that he wasn’t going to respond at all. “I think that would be a mistake,” he finally said. Regulus looked up in surprise. “It is clear that Harry considers you a friend and there are no shortage of dangers that pose a threat to Harry’s life. It may not have been your best year, but taking yourself away from a child who looks up to you would only harm him.”

Regulus tried to respond, really he did, but he couldn’t think of a single word that he wanted to say. Dumbledore gave him a small wave and left the Hospital Wing without another word. Regulus continued to stare after him until Madam Pomfrey finally interrupted.

He was so sure that he should leave, in fact, he thought Dumbledore was going to force him out once they were away from spectators, but he could never have predicted that Dumbledore would all but manipulate him into staying. He thought about Harry’s worried little face and felt his heart clench painfully. Yes, he’d put Harry in terrible danger this year, but at the same time, there were so few adults that cared about the boy and even fewer that could keep up with his day-to-day activities as well as Regulus could. For now, he decided, he would stay.

## Chapter End Notes

i made a tumblr where i post updates and sneak previews of upcoming chapters, if you're interested

<https://www.tumblr.com/blog/maladaptivewriting>

## the news.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was no reason for Regulus to still be in the Hospital Wing. He was no longer sick or unwell, but he still stayed hidden behind his drawn curtains. It had been two days since Dumbledore had come to see him. Madam Pomfrey informed him that exams had been canceled, so there was really no reason for him to remain at school any longer that year, but he also knew he couldn't just leave.

According to Madam Pomfrey, his friends had attempted to visit him several times in the past few days, but she honored his wishes and turned them away. Regulus was grateful for this, but he should have known it couldn't last. She asked him again that morning if he would like to see his friends, but he only shook his head. Mostly, he was surprised that she hadn't kicked him out yet, though he figured that day was coming. He had planned to spend another day sulking in bed, the midafternoon sun already shining brightly through the windows, when suddenly the curtains were violently pulled back.

Regulus looked up in alarm to see Luna standing there, still holding the bunched curtains in one of her hands. Her face was carefully blank, although this was not unusual for the girl. Still, Regulus thought that buried deep beneath her neutral exterior, there was an intense sadness emanating from her.

"Luna," he greeted her after a long moment of silence where the two of them only stared at each other.

"I'm sorry," she said, and then, alarmingly, her bottom lip began to wobble dangerously. Regulus had never seen Pandora upset, nor had he ever witnessed her getting even mildly annoyed, so witnessing her daughter's nearly identical face morph into an expression of anguished sorrow was a frightening experience.

"No, no, it's okay," Regulus soothed. He was up and out of bed before he realized it, his arms coming out to cradle the crying girl. "What are you sorry for? There is nothing to be sorry about."

Luna didn't respond right away, only continuing the cry until her sobs turned into quiet little whimpers. Regulus gently rubbed her back. "It was my fault," she finally said.

"What was your fault?" He asked. She pulled back to look at him, her face blotchy with tears. He sat back down on the bed and dragged her along until she was seated at the foot of the bed facing him.

"I was the one who stole your diary," she confessed.

"What?" He said, confused.

“You were always writing in it,” she explained. “But I thought it might be hurting you. You seemed so sick, and the diary smelled weird.”

“It smelled weird?” He asked.

She nodded emphatically. “So, I tried to get rid of it in Myrtle's bathroom,” she said. “I know I shouldn't have taken it.” Oh, of course. This answered a question that Regulus had all but forgotten he wanted an answer to. The diary had inexplicably gone missing. He'd thought, after he found out about the possession, that Tom had forced him into it, possibly to gain access to Harry. However, he had not anticipated that someone else would take the object and dispose of it in the toilet.

“That's okay, Luna,” he said. He wanted to erase the guilty look from her face. He understood why she did it, although the olfactory aspect still puzzled him. “I'm lucky to have a friend who looks out for me like that.”

Luna gave him a slight smile and then opened her mouth as if to say something. The sound of the door banging open interrupted them. Harry, Ron, and Hermione rushed into the Wing, stumbling together as a group.

“Madam Pomfrey said we could come back,” Hermione explained excitedly. Traitor, Regulus thought. Of course, the matron wouldn't allow him to hide out here for the rest of term. That explained why Luna had suddenly barged in.

“Who are you?” Ron asked, directing the question toward Luna. Hermione elbowed him and shot him a judgmental look.

“I'm Luna,” Luna responded softly. Ron was still looking at her confusedly.

“She's my friend,” Regulus explained. “She's in Ravenclaw.”

“You have friends in other houses?” Ron asked.

“Ronald, honestly,” Hermione said in an exasperated voice.

“How are you feeling?” Harry asked, ignoring them.

“I'm fine,” Regulus answered. “Rested.” Harry did not look satisfied, but Ron and Hermione seemed to be having a silent conversation with just facial expressions. “Hermione, I'm glad to see that you're okay.”

Hermione turned to him, beaming with a smile. “I can't believe they figured it out. I'm so glad you didn't die.” The contrasting sentences made Regulus burst out laughing. It was the first time he'd laughed in days, maybe weeks, but it felt good, better than he would have expected.

“Figured what out?” Luna tilted her head at Hermione. Hermione appeared unsettled by the question for some inexplicable reason, but she schooled her face quickly.

“Well...” she said, faltering out like she wasn't sure how to answer. She exchanged an unsteady look with Ron and Harry.

“She already knows about the diary,” Regulus explained, “at least partially. You may as well tell her.” Regulus was also curious about what she meant by them ‘figuring it out.’ Plus, he felt guilty for the distance he had created between himself and Luna. He knew she didn't have many other friends, but he let his own problems prevent him from spending time with her. He figured that now was as good a time as any to include her, especially if it meant that Harry, Ron, and Hermione would get to know her.

Hermione appeared uncertain for a moment before she seemed to come to a decision and launched into a story about her discovering what the creature was based on, which made her realize why only Harry could hear it.

“It had to be a basilisk, they can live for hundreds of years and it’s a giant snake! That’s why it's a creature only Salazar Slytherin and his heirs could control because no one else would be able to speak to it. Except for Harry of course, but he’s not the Heir,” she explained excitedly. Luna listened with rapt attention, asking thoughtful questions every now and then that seemed to stump even Hermione.

Harry and Ron listened and added their own perspective once and a while. Luna seemed thoroughly impressed with what she was calling their “grand adventure.” Harry would cringe slightly every time she said it, but still managed to give Luna a kind smile. Ron only looked proud.

Though Regulus was annoyed at first that Madam Pomfrey had let them all in without asking him, he couldn't deny that the afternoon spent with the four children was healing in a way he would have never expected. He left the Hospital Wing that evening, and by the time he was on the Hogwarts Express back to London, he felt calmer than he had all year.

Regulus knew Harry was stressed about the summer, but he listened carefully as Ron and Hermione talked happily about their own plans. Luna sat with them on the train, mentioning the plans she had to search for some creatures none of them had ever heard of. Hermione looked especially bewildered but didn't question it for the time being.

Regulus made it back to Grimmauld and took a few moments to settle himself. It was raining outside, the sound muffled by the old walls. He had decided not to collect the basilisk venom from the Chamber before the school year ended. The only way he could access it was by asking Harry to go with him, and he was sure Harry would need more time to recover before venturing back down into the Chamber of Secrets.

Besides, Regulus figured the locket wasn't going anywhere, and for the time being, there was another theory he wanted to test. He was almost certain that the diary was causing the bizarre dreams of James, but he wasn't sure how much of it was purposefully done by Tom Riddle. It was possible that it was his own magic's reaction to the diary's power. Furthermore, he couldn't figure out if the dreams were actually dreams, or if they were some sort of visions. They all originally started as memories, but clearly, things were changing in them.

The only way he knew to test these hypotheses was to try and interact with the locket. While the diary usually only affected him while he was actively writing in it, he knew the power of the locket was more prevalent. He was sure this had to do with the Norse ritual he'd attempted to cast on the Horcrux, most likely causing the locket's magic to expand and open in a way that it wasn't there before.

He could feel the dark magic of the locket the moment he reached the floor of his father's study. It seemed to be spreading past the walls at a rapid rate. The nausea that Regulus so often felt in its presence was immediate and dizzying. It made him unreasonably nervous to be in the presence of the Horcrux again, but at the same time, he felt invigorated, as if he was about to partake in an addiction he'd been denying himself all year. He told Kreacher to pull him out of the room if he didn't leave the room in fifteen minutes. Kreacher looked nervous, but merely nodded.

He unlocked the study door and entered the room. It was so much more powerful than the diary ever was. The hissing was so loud and obnoxious that Regulus almost wished he could go deaf permanently rather than continue to hear it. The dark magic emanating from the locket seemed to be warping the world around it. The walls of the study looked like they were rotting, the wallpaper peeling up and turning black. The floor was dented where the locket lay in the center of the room.

Regulus walked slowly toward the locket, but it felt like gravity was increasing with each step he took. By the time he was within reach of it, he was on his hands and knees, shaking from the effort of moving. His joints ached and he felt a headache sharpen behind his eyes. He reached out a quivering hand and with one outstretched finger, touched the locket.

The effect of immediate. He collapsed on the ground, his limbs giving out beneath him. His head slammed into the floor and his vision went black for a few long seconds. His finger hurt from where he'd touched the Horcrux and he hissed out loud as he pulled back to cradle it in his other hand.

"Oh, darling. Not again." Regulus looked toward the sound of the voice. Of course, it was James. Regulus didn't know whether he should feel happy or distressed.

"Am I hallucinating?" Regulus mumbled, unable to even lift his head fully off the ground. James stood above him wearing what looked like pajama bottoms and a ratty old navy blue sleep shirt.

"I'm not sure," James said. He knelt down next to Regulus and ran a comforting hand through Regulus's hair. Regulus leaned into the hand, allowing his eyes to close in pleasure. "I don't think so."

"What does it feel like to you?" Regulus asked, his words slurring dangerously.

James was quiet for a long moment, continuing to scratch at Regulus's scalp softly. "It feels like drifting, I think. It's not exactly clear in moments like these when things get sharp and clear again." Regulus was struggling to keep his eyes open now, but he so desperately wanted to look at James's sweet, soft face.

“I almost got Harry killed,” he confessed, the words spilling from him before he could stop them.

“It’s okay,” James replied soothingly.

“No, no,” Regulus said, trying to shake his head. His head felt so heavy, like would never be able to lift it again. “You don’t understand.”

“I do,” James said, his voice a soft whisper. “I do.” It was the last thing he heard. He could feel his consciousness slipping away, the last sensations he felt being a small hand curling around his wrist and the squeeze of apparition.

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Three days passed before he opened his eyes again. It’s clear that he was at least partially right, the magic from the Horcrux causes the visions. Sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle has nothing to do with the locket to Regulus’s knowledge so it’s unlikely that it was Tom Riddle specifically that was causing Regulus to dream of James.

The vision he had of James in the study couldn’t be based on a memory. For one, James had never been to Grimmauld Place. Though he threatened to break in and steal Regulus away more than once. Regulus is also moderately sure that he hadn’t ever seen James in that specific set of clothing. What Regulus couldn’t figure out was whether the visions were just his unconscious playing tricks on him, creating some sort of fake interaction with the only person who ever made Regulus feel safe, or if he is somehow interacting with James from beyond the grave.

It seems preposterous that Regulus would be able to interact with the real James. Yes, ghosts exist but they are typically visible to everyone, not to mention they’re more like reflections of who the person was in life rather than an actual person. Not to mention that Regulus has never met a ghost who appeared corporeal rather than transparent or a ghost that could change their clothing.

It was odd and made Regulus anxious. Being in the presence of the Horcrux no doubt took a huge toll on his body, indicated by the three days where he was unconscious, so it would not be wise for him to revisit the locket anytime soon. On the other hand, Regulus couldn’t deny the pull he constantly felt or the temptation to put himself in danger just to see James again, if only for a moment.

Kreacher was clearly just as stressed as Regulus was, if not more. He all but begged Regulus not to go back into his father’s study. Regulus eventually agreed though it took several days of discussion before he decided on it, and even then he had to consciously work to keep himself from tiptoeing up to locket in the middle of the night.

Ultimately, he settled on the decision to focus his attention on warding for the time being. He knew now that the Dark Lord had more than one Horcrux which was just about the worst

news Regulus had ever heard, but he wasn't sure where to start with finding them. Despite his misgivings about Dumbledore, he couldn't deny that he was thankful to not be solely responsible for finding the cursed items.

Besides, the locket's dark magic was spreading more and more each day and if he didn't want Grimmauld to fall prey to the Dark Lord's warped soul, then he needed to find a way to contain the item. It was because of this that he spent several weeks reading and rereading all the books he owned on warding. He went to Diagon Alley one morning and purchased every book on the subject that he did not already own and even ventured into Knockturn to see if there was anything else he could locate.

Warding, he learned, was much more complicated than he originally thought. There were blood wards on Grimmauld he knew, though he never bothered to learn much of the specifics about it. It turned out they were so old and embedded with magic that anyone without Black blood would struggle to even practice spells within the house without feeling drained. Not to mention the specific wards that kept any Black from being damaged by spells cast by someone outside of the family.

Though he ended the few weeks of research with pages and pages of notes, he settled on a few simple, but powerful wards for the Horcrux. One of them would restrict anyone from touching the object, it acted as a deterrent not just physically, but mentally as well, causing anyone who saw the locket to instantly forget what they were planning to do with it. He added another that would alert him if anyone got within a few feet of the object.

He added several wards to the study itself as well. One which acted in a similar way to the wards on the locket, causing people to forget about the door after looking at it, and one to alert him if anyone even got near it. He also added a few basic wards that would simply stop someone from physically entering the room, even if they managed to get passed the ones causing them to forget, they wouldn't be able to cross the barrier.

The final ward he cast was one of the more complex ones he'd researched, commonly used by Unspeakables and curse breakers. It was actually several wards interwoven together which acted as a wall to keep magic in and out of a specific area. He knew he needed to keep the locket's magic from spreading and this ward definitely rose to that challenge. It took him nearly an hour to work all the wards together into an impenetrable blanket.

He also learned that casting wards was far more exhausting than he had expected. He stumbled downstairs to the kitchen after the wards were all in place and fell heavily into a chair, his body tired and aching. Despite his exhaustion, he felt satisfied that he'd managed to do something. By the time he had the final ward in place, he could no longer hear the hissed Parseltongue spilling from the room.

There was a tinge of regret, of course, that came with restricting his access to the locket, but he did his best to ignore it. He couldn't imagine that James would be happy to see him if it even was James, to begin with if he kept coming back and kept getting hurt. Besides, he told himself, he could always undo them if he was desperate enough, if he could come up with a compelling reason to seek out James once again.

He pushed the temptation away and called for Kreacher to bring him tea and breakfast. He had begun working on the wards the moment he woke up and it was still only a few hours after daybreak now that he'd finished.

Kreacher appeared next to him with his breakfast as well as that day's Daily Prophet. He avoided the paper for a second, opting to fix his tea and settle in. However, the moment he laid eyes on the front page, his whole world stopped. Every thought of warding and Horcruxes left his head faster than he would have thought possible.

He could feel his heart beating frantically in his chest and blood rushing in his ears. There on the front page, it read:

MASS MURDERER SIRIUS BLACK ESCAPED FROM AZKABAN

## Chapter End Notes

do you guys say reg as r-EGG or r-EDGE?



## **the leaky cauldron.**

The moment Regulus read the headline, he was up and out of the house. He didn't even stop to get properly dressed, only stepped outside and apparated straight to the gates of Hogwarts. He needed to know exactly what was going on. He felt dizzy and disconnected from the world around him, his head buzzing with uninterrupted panicking.

The gates of Hogwarts opened for him easily, as if he was expected, and he all but ran up the trail to Dumbledore's office. The grounds and hallways were empty, the barren wasteland of summer, but Regulus was thankful for it. He did not even have to speak before the statue leading to the headmaster's office jumped aside and let him pass.

"Is it true?" were the first words out of his mouth when he opened the office door.

"I am afraid that it is," Dumbledore replied. He was already standing as if he'd been pacing the floor long before Regulus arrived, though he did not seem surprised to see Regulus enter.

"How did this happen?" Regulus asked, his voice surprisingly steady, given the circumstances. "This should not be possible."

"We do not know," Dumbledore answered evenly. "The guards reported him missing early this morning."

"The guards? You mean the dementors?" Regulus clarified. Dumbledore nodded. "But he was there last night? Did he swim to shore?"

"There have been no sightings of the man," Dumbledore responded. "Do you think he will try to contact you?"

"Contact me?" Regulus asked incredulously. "He doesn't even know I'm alive. I'm not sure how he would even manage to hear about it in Azkaban. I was told he wasn't allowed any visitors."

"But you did try to visit him?" Dumbledore asked.

"Tried might be an overstatement," Regulus responded. "But I did speak to someone about it last summer. I was told that even as family I wasn't allowed to see him."

"Hmm," Dumbledore hummed curiously. "The ministry will most likely want to speak with you, just so you are aware."

"Do we have any idea what he might be after? Why he escaped now?" Regulus asked, though he could already feel the unsteady jump of anxiety at the thought, as if he already knew but was trying his best not to think of it.

"They said he had been speaking in his sleep," Dumbledore answered. He paused for so long that Regulus thought he might not continue. "He was repeating the phrase 'he's at

Hogwarts.””

“What?” Regulus asked, his voice much louder than he intended. Dumbledore nodded grimly. “No.” Regulus shook his head violently. “You don’t think he means...” Regulus trailed off uncertainly.

“It is possible,” Dumbledore responded. “He was responsible for Harry’s parents’ death. Harry destroyed Voldemort that night. He could be out for revenge, or to finish what Voldemort started.”

Regulus felt like he was going to be sick. He was so distressed by this piece of information that he didn’t even flinch at the use of the Dark Lord’s name. He sat down heavily into a chair, blowing a breath out between his teeth.

“Where is Harry?” Regulus asked. “Could Sir— my brother find him?” Regulus couldn’t bring himself to say his name, it felt like ash on his tongue.

“He is protected,” Dumbledore answered. “There is no way for someone intending him harm to make it through the blood wards.”

Regulus nodded in understanding. “What are you going to tell him?” He asked. He already planned to write to Harry the moment he left Dumbledore’s office, but there was no use repeating information.

“I do not think it’s wise to tell him too much,” Dumbledore replied. “I believe he is safe at home, so it may add unnecessary stress if we told him. Not to mention, he has a very strong rebellious spirit. If he learns what Sirius did, I fear Harry may go looking for him.”

Regulus flinched at his brother’s name like he would the Dark Lord’s. “So, you will tell him nothing?”

“For now,” Dumbledore said, looking away and gazing out the window with unseeing eyes. Regulus wanted to argue, but he figured it would only make things harder for himself. He left soon after, having gained the information he came for.

His traitorous brother was out, free from Azkaban, a place that was supposed to be inescapable. Somehow his brother had managed it. Regulus didn’t even know why he was surprised, his brother managed to escape Grimmauld and their parents when he was sixteen. Yes, Regulus helped him out of the house once, but his brother was the one who managed to stay away. Even their unruly Uncle Alphard came crawling back to the family, while his brother did not.

He needed to warn Harry. Though Dumbledore wanted to keep him in the dark, Regulus did not feel that this was the best course of action. Who knew what kind of trouble Harry could get into during the summer? He really just wanted to apparate to Harry’s muggle relatives’ home and make sure Harry was safe, but he knew that would only cause problems.

He wondered if his brother would come to Grimmauld. Though he hadn’t been back since he was sixteen, there was always a chance that he would use it as a safe place to land, now that

the entire country would be looking for him. He apparated back to Grimmauld the moment he was outside of Hogwarts and fell to his knees in exhaustion. He couldn't wait till his body was old enough to handle apparition without collapsing, it was terribly inconvenient.

"Kreacher," he called, leaning heavily against the wall, his legs folded beneath him.

"Master Regulus," Kreacher greeted immediately after popping into existence next to him.

"My brother has escaped from Azkaban," he said. "If he tries to enter this house, you are to lock him in a room and come and find me immediately, do you understand?" Kreacher nodded. "It does not matter if I am at Hogwarts, surrounded by people, you come retrieve me right away."

Kreacher did not question him and Regulus was grateful for it. He stood shakily and, once he felt well enough, pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill.

*Harry,*

*I can't tell you much, but you should know that a dangerous Death Eater has escaped from Azkaban. Try to stick close to home this summer. They have no idea where he is and until he's caught, it's important that you stay safe. I will tell you the moment I know more.*

*How are your muggle relatives treating you?*

*Regulus Black*

It was far more vague than he really wanted it to be, but he was afraid it would be intercepted or read by someone else. For now, it would have to be enough. He sent it off right away.

After that, the summer was quiet, suspiciously so. He receives letters from Ron and Hermione. Ron regales him with stories about Egypt, woefully unaware of what is happening back home, and Hermione tells him about her summer traveling with her parents. She asks very specific questions about what Regulus is doing, but he keeps his answers vague.

One morning he receives an unexpected letter from Luna. It isn't until he opens it that he realizes it's his birthday. He never celebrated it as a child and the only people who ever bothered to give him a gift were Pandora and James. He really shouldn't be surprised that Luna would also send him something, though he has no memory of sharing the date of his birthday with her. This question is answered immediately when he opens the letter.

It is a simple birthday note, written in her small cursive, but included is a small picture of Regulus and Pandora. They are sitting near the Black Lake, Pandora looking happy, giggling in the sun, with Regulus next to her with an unwilling smile on his face. He couldn't be sure why, but the moment he laid eyes on it, he felt the intense urge to cry. He's not even worried about the fact that Luna just revealed that she knows exactly who he is without ever managing to say the words. He sent her a thank you note back.

The days were long and Regulus felt useless and horribly stressed. Occasionally he would find himself in front of his father's study at night, weighing the risks of going in to try and

speak to James again. He desperately wanted his advice on what to do about his brother. More than that though, he wanted to know if James knew that his brother had betrayed them. He wanted to know if James knew why he'd done it. One night, Kreacher appeared next to him and all but begged Regulus not to go in again. His scared voice was enough to deter Regulus, at least for the time being.

No one reached out to him from the Ministry. Some mornings he considered going in to ask the Aurors if they'd found anything, but he ultimately decided against it. He wasn't sure who he could trust and he couldn't risk anyone else finding out his secret. Dumbledore promised to keep him updated, but so far the only useful bit of information Regulus received was the news that dementors would be stationed at Hogwarts if his brother wasn't found before school began. It's bad news, Regulus thought, as having dementors around children was probably the least safe plan they could enact, but it seemed to be unavoidable.

He only got one other letter from Harry filled with questions about the Death Eater that escaped, but Regulus kept his response as vague as possible. The only time he left the house was to purchase a collection of absurdly expensive Quidditch attire for Harry's birthday. He decided against sending it off though, opting to wait until they were back at school to give it to him. Regulus did not want to risk another rogue house elf stealing the gift.

He wondered if they would make it back to school without incident that year, but of course, that thought was ruined when a few days into August, Regulus received another letter from Harry.

*Regulus,*

*Don't freak out. I had to leave the Dursleys. I accidentally blew up my aunt. I thought I was going to get arrested, but it was all okay. I'm at the Leaky Cauldron now. The Minister talked to me and told me to stay there until school began. Do you think it has to do with that escaped prisoner?*

*I should also tell you that I found out who he is. Why didn't you tell me it was your father? Are you in danger? Do you think he's going to come after you? Write me as soon as you can.*

*Harry*

Regulus wondered if receiving so much shocking news in one summer would be enough to re-kill him. He could feel his heart racing as he read and reread Harry's letter. Harry had run away while Regulus's brother was out there possibly trying to hunt Harry down. Thank Merlin he was at the Leaky Cauldron and not out somewhere in muggle London on his own. It was surprising that the Minister himself would arrange it, Regulus didn't think Fudge would be so proactive, but he figured that Dumbledore probably had a hand in that. Although, he did wonder why Dumbledore hadn't told Regulus about what happened.

Regulus packed up that very afternoon, having Kreacher gather all the things he needed for the upcoming school year. There was no way he was going to stay at Grimmauld while Harry was living alone in the Leaky Cauldron.

It was late in the evening by the time he arrived by floo, and the inn was nearly empty, only a few people left drinking and eating their dinner. Regulus didn't even wait to speak to anyone. He headed up the stairs right away, intending to knock on every single door until he found Harry's. He needn't have bothered though, as the moment he reached the top floor he saw Harry opening the door wearing a set of the expensive wizard clothes Regulus had purchased for him the previous year.

"Regulus!" Harry shouted, sounding like a child just caught sneaking out of the house.

"Harry," Regulus greeted.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, the surprise fading into happiness.

"My mother dropped me off," Regulus said. "I explained that you were here alone, and she said I could spend the rest of the summer here."

"Great!" Harry said with a wide smile. "Have you had dinner yet?"

"It's after ten?" Regulus responded. Harry looked vaguely abashed.

"Right, well," Harry said unevenly. Regulus rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

"Come on, I could eat," Regulus responded. He put his trunk in Harry's room for the time being and went downstairs to order dinner.

"What'll you be havin' Harry?" Tom, the barkeeper asked, before he registered the other child with Harry. "Who're you?"

"I'm Regulus," Regulus responded confidently. "I need a room please, from now until the first of September."

Tom looked uneasy by the request but gave him a key once Regulus presented prepayment in full. It was clear that Tom was unsettled by Regulus's appearance in the bar. Regulus wondered if he should have cut his hair before coming out into the wizarding world. With his brother's pictures adorning every wall, the long hair meant to make them look like father and son would perhaps work against him.

"How long have you been here?" Regulus asked once they were alone and dinner had been ordered.

"Two days," Harry replied. His voice was level enough, but he was giving Regulus a look like he wasn't going to be distracted from what he wanted.

"Right," Regulus mumbled. Harry continued to stare at him. Regulus had no idea how to explain to Harry why he wanted to keep his brother's name a secret. He knew logically that Harry would find out eventually, likely the moment he returned to the wizarding world, but it still felt like information he did not want to share.

"So," Harry said, breaking the long tense silence. "Sirius is your dad, right?"

Regulus cringed. “Yes,” he answered. “I didn’t want to tell you through a letter. I didn’t want you to think... well, I don’t know.”

“Did you think I would blame you for your dad escaping prison?” Harry asked, looking at Regulus uncertainly.

“No, not exactly. But he’s not a good guy,” Regulus said, stumbling through his half-baked explanation. “There is something you should know about him.” Regulus chewed on his lip nervously.

“What?” Harry prompted when Regulus failed to go on.

“Here you go, boys,” Tom interrupted, setting their food down. He gave Regulus another uneasy look before walking away. Regulus looked around the bar. Despite its emptiness, he expected someone to be watching them, but all the people left were minding their own business. It made him vaguely nervous like his brother could just waltz in and take Harry without anyone noticing.

“What do you mean, there is something I need to know about him?” Harry asked again, starting to shovel food into his mouth.

“Oh, right,” Regulus said, his attention pulled back. “Listen, I don’t think anyone wants you to know this, but you need to be aware because you could be in danger.” Harry nodded for him to go on. “He was friends with your parents, or James at least. I think, well, from what I’ve read, he’s responsible for why they’re dead.”

Regulus couldn’t stop stumbling over his words. He never thought he’d have to explain this out loud. Just thinking about it made him feel ill, but trying to explain to Harry that his brother was the reason his parents were found and murdered, the reason he grew up an orphan.

“Oh,” Harry said. He’d abandoned his dinner for the moment, looking stunned.

“There is no guarantee that he will come after you. I mean, for all we know he could be halfway to South America by now, but it’s why you have to be extra careful. He’s extremely dangerous,” Regulus explained.

“What about you?” Harry asked.

“What do you mean?” Harry’s face was twisted with concern. It struck Regulus as so odd that Harry would look this way when asking about Regulus’s safety, but not his own.

“Do you think he’s going to come after you?” Harry asked. Regulus almost felt like laughing. There was no way for his brother to know he was alive, and even if he did, he couldn’t imagine he would really care.

“No, I doubt it,” Regulus replied. He almost wished that his brother would come after him. The moment Regulus laid eyes on his brother, he was going to kill him, that he knew for a fact.

“Oh, okay,” Harry said, shrugging. He still looked unsure but went back to eating his dinner. They ended the night quickly after that. Regulus’s room was right next to Harry’s, which Regulus was glad for. He wanted to be close by.

Regulus spent nearly an hour after Harry went to bed warding his bedroom door. Some of them were so strong that even the housekeeper would have trouble entering the room, but Regulus knew it was necessary. The others might believe that his brother wouldn’t risk coming after Harry in a place that public, but there was no telling what twelve years spent with dementors would have done to his already tenuous grip on his sanity. They would have to be careful, but at least Regulus was here. He wasn’t going to make the same mistakes that he’d made the year before. He intended to protect Harry, using whatever means he had at his disposal.

# **the book of monsters.**

## Chapter Notes

im posting this chapter early because i have no self control

Regulus and Harry met up the next morning for breakfast, stumbling down the inn still yawning and rubbing sleep from their eyes. Tom trudged over the moment they sat down, providing them helping piles of eggs, sausage, and toast. He gave Harry a toothless grin and Harry gave a half smile back.

“Thank you,” Regulus said politely. Tom ignored him altogether, keeping one shoulder turned so Regulus was always slightly behind him. Harry shot Tom a glare as the man walked away, but Regulus wasn’t terribly bothered.

“Have you purchased your school books yet?” Regulus asked as they tucked into their food.

“No,” Harry said around a mouthful of eggs. “Have you?”

Regulus shook his head. “We should do that today. I haven’t done any classwork yet,” Regulus explained. Harry nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, me neither,” he said, still somehow chewing the same bite of food.

“Ugh,” Regulus said in disgust, “please chew your food before speaking.” Harry swallowed loudly and laughed.

“I’m so sorry, your highness,” Harry said sardonically. Regulus rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

Harry’s smile faltered after a few seconds, and he suddenly looked much too serious. “Why do you think Tom is acting like that?” He asked.

Regulus shrugged. “A lot of people probably aren’t going to trust me as long as my father remains free from Azkaban,” Regulus answered. “I look like him, it must be hard to look at me and not see a mass murderer.”

“Right, but it’s not like you’re a murderer,” Harry argued. “They shouldn’t treat you differently just because Sirius Black is your father. It’s not like you chose him.”

Regulus let out a helpless chuckle. Oh, if only Harry knew that he did choose him as his father. “It’s not a big deal. Please are always judging you for things you can’t help, and it’s always turned out fine.”



“I hate when people do that,” Harry said irritably.

“I know,” Regulus said with a sigh. “But it can’t be helped. I’m sure they’ll catch my father soon and this will all be behind us.” Harry did not look convinced, but he let it go for the time being.

They left shortly after eating and headed straight for Gringotts. It took them a while to get money from their vaults, or at least, it took Regulus a while. He shooed Harry off when they entered Gringotts and he watched as Harry went up to speak with one of the goblins who quickly led him away. Once he was out of sight, Regulus walked confidently up to a goblin and demanded to speak with someone in charge of his family’s vaults.

Much like his first visit to Gringotts a few years ago, he was pulled into a separate room and a smartly dressed goblin entered. “I need to know if anyone has accessed the Black vaults,” Regulus said the moment the door was closed, not bothering with pleasantries.

“You are asking if Lord Black has used his money?” the goblin replied. Regulus bristled. This wasn’t the same goblin who’d helped him hatch his plan of pretending to be his brother’s son, but surely he was aware of who Regulus really was

“Yes, that’s what I’m asking,” Regulus said through clenched teeth. “I’m not trying to stop him, I just need to know.”

The goblin looked suspicious of him but eventually responded. “Lord Black has not accessed the Black vaults yet.”

“Will you stop him if he does?” Regulus asked, though he already knew the answer. Gringotts operated separately from the Ministry, they always had, and Regulus remembered his father telling him multiple times that Gringotts was only safe so long as they did not let the Ministry control them.

“We will not,” the goblin responded, effectively ending their conversation. Regulus wanted to demand that they tell him the moment his brother tried to make a withdrawal, but he knew they wouldn’t. His brother was Lord Black and no one could get between a Lord and his money.

He made a withdrawal himself, though he still had a mostly full coin purse from the last time he visited, and made his way out of the bank. Harry was waiting for him on the steps, and they walked together to Flourish and Blotts. Regulus pulled out his book list for the year. He hadn’t bothered to look at it much when he first got his letter, but it didn’t appear that he needed much.

“The Monster Book of Monsters?” He asked curiously. “Is that for Care of Magical Creatures?”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry answered. “Hagrid sent me a copy of that, I didn’t realize it was for a class.”

“Hagrid sent it to you?” Harry nodded his head. “I wonder why he was the one to send it,” Regulus pondered.

“It’s a crazy book, literally tried to attack me,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“It what? How is that allowed to be a school book?” Regulus asked, laughing along uneasily.

“Who knows?” Harry said. In the bookshop window of Flourish and Blotts was the book in question. The books were bizarre-looking, covered in fur, with large eyes sticking out of one cover. They appeared to have teeth lining the sides and a ridgeback line of fur decorated the spine. Inside a large cage in the window, there were several books snapping and grappling with each as torn pages flew out. Two books, in particular, looked like they were fighting in an intense wrestling match, with somehow both of them losing.

Harry and Regulus found themselves watching the books fight with morbid curiosity. Regulus wondered how they were ever supposed to do any reading for the class if this was the book they were working with. Perhaps learning how to open the book before their first class was part of the assignment, maybe they had to learn how to calm the beast, Regulus thought with a rye chuckle.

“Come to get your new books?” the manager asked the moment they entered the shop.

“Yes,” Regulus answered. “I believe I need one of those monsters.”

“I already have one,” Harry added. The manager shot him a grateful look.

“Get out of the way,” the manager said, brushing them both aside. He put on a pair of thick gloves before walking over to the cage that held the fighting books. Regulus and Harry watched as the manager fought to draw two books apart. They tried their best not to laugh, but by the time he brought the struggling book back, they were both red in the face. The manager looked more than a little annoyed.

“Thank you,” Regulus said and cast a quick *petrificus totalus* on it when the manager’s back was turned. Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise, most likely wondering how Regulus managed to use magic outside of Hogwarts. Regulus would need to make sure Harry knew he was able to use magic in populated magical areas, like Diagon Alley or the Hogwarts Express.

“I am never stocking them again,” the manager shouted, launching into a small rant about his past bad purchasing decisions. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Regulus and Harry both purchased their book for Divination: *Unflagging the Future* by Cassandra Vablatsky. Regulus was perusing the table with various Divination textbooks and half listening to the manager tell them about each one when he noticed that Harry wasn’t listening. Instead, Harry was intently staring at the copy of *Death Omens: What to Do When You Know the Worst Is Coming*. On the front of the book was an image of the Grim, the death omen that took the shape of a black dog.

“Everything okay?” Regulus asked, elbowing Harry lightly in the side. Harry’s face was pale, his eyes shining with paranoia.

“Oh, I wouldn’t read that if I were you,” the manager said lightly, finally noticing what they were looking at.

“Harry?” Regulus prompted, interrupting the manager’s next statement.

“What?” Harry finally looked up at him. “Oh, yeah, I’m fine.” He gave the book one more unnerving look before walking away as if in a daze. He wasn’t sure what it was about the Grim that had Harry spooked, but he made a mental note to ask him the next chance he had.

They purchased their remaining third-year books before heading out. The day was slow and easy after that. They stayed in Diagon Alley, spending most of the day at Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor doing classwork. Florean himself kept bringing out free sundaes every half hour and by the end of their first day, Regulus was so sick of ice cream that he had to personally ask him to stop.

That night Regulus and Harry lounged in Harry’s room, double-checking their lists to ensure they had everything. When Harry’s back was turned, Regulus quickly forged a signature on his Hogsmeade permission slip. He’d forgotten about it until that moment.

“Did you send off your Hogsmeade letter yet?” Regulus asked. A disturbed feeling was growing in the back of his head, but he couldn’t quite place why yet.

“No,” Harry answered sullenly. “My family refused to sign it. They were going to, I think, before I blew up my aunt.”

“Oh,” Regulus responded. “I’m sorry, that’s unfortunate.” Harry looked so forlorn that Regulus felt a squeeze of sympathy for him.

“I bet nobody else will have that problem. I’m probably going to be the only one stuck back at school.” Regulus privately agreed, but he knew better than to say that out loud.

“It’ll be all right. Hogsmeade gets old pretty fast. Plus I’ll be sure to bring you back some Butterbeer and candy,” Regulus said with a smile. Harry gave him a smile back, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

It wasn’t until later that Regulus realized how relaxed he felt after finding out that Harry would not be allowed to go to Hogsmeade, the feeling of dread from earlier dispersing the moment he heard it. Though it was a shame that Harry would miss out on the experience that other third-years got to have, he would be much safer staying at Hogwarts rather than wandering around the wizarding village of Hogsmeade where anyone could have access to him.

Regulus also sent off a quick letter to Hermione, Ron, and Luna as well that night, telling them each that he was staying at the Leaky Cauldron for the rest of summer with Harry. He doubted he would see Ron or Hermione before school began given how much their families were traveling that summer, but he figured Luna would be willing to visit them.

The summer days passed quickly. Each day was easy and lazy, they did their classwork together but quickly ran out of assignments. After that, they spent most of their time wandering around Diagon and exploring the various stores there. Harry nearly spent all the money in his vault to buy a new broom, the Firebolt, but Regulus was thankfully able to talk him out of it. He distracted him by giving him his belated birthday gift of various Quidditch attire, which Harry seemed more than pleased by.

They ran into Seamus and Dean one afternoon, as well as Neville more than once. One day Luna joined them for breakfast, coming through the floo on her own, dressed in a purple dress that looked handmade. She wore dangly earrings that looked like pink lizards and mismatched socks pulled up above her knees.

“Hello, Luna,” Regulus greeted.

“Regulus,” she said. “Hello, Harry.” Harry gave her a nervous smile, which Luna returned wholeheartedly.

Regulus had all but forgotten about the birthday note Luna sent to him. He wasn’t even sure how she knew his birthday in the first place, but it was possible Pandora told her. She looked at him the same way she had the previous year, confirming for him that she had probably always known. Pandora was always able to see things that everyone else missed, making her an almost intimidating figure to spend time with.

He remembers one time, a few weeks after James began publicly dating Lily, that Pandora found him sulking at the Quidditch Pitch. He hadn’t told anyone about his secret relationship with James, though he often wondered if Barty knew given how many times he found Regulus sobbing in their dorm room. Regardless, Pandora somehow knew right away. “Just because James loves Lily, doesn’t mean no one will ever love you,” she said before he even had time to greet her. She was always unnerving, but in a way that Regulus found distinctly endearing.

Luna looked so much like her that it was almost painful. Watching her and Harry interact pulled at Regulus’s sense of nostalgia in a way that made him lose touch with reality for a few dangerous moments. Though he never witnessed Pandora and James interact, he always wondered if they could have been friends.

“Are you joining us today?” Regulus asked, gesturing for Luna to take a seat with them.

“Yes, please,” she said. He could tell that Harry was nervous around Luna, though it didn’t exactly surprise him, he figured that most people probably felt nervous around her, but Luna didn’t have any other friends, and he wasn’t about to exclude her again.

He had no reason to be worried though because, by the mid-afternoon, Luna and Harry were thick as thieves. Though Luna had a proclivity to speak almost in riddles, Harry was always kind about it, listening with a smile and asking questions to keep her talking. Luna was clearly overjoyed with having someone to spend time with. He gathered that she was probably very lonely, even during the summer, when she had only her father for company.

Their friendship was definitely helped along when Harry was being pointed and stared at most of the morning by a family that happened to spot his cursed scar and Luna simply said, “That’s not very nice. It must be hard to be famous for the worst thing that ever happened to you.” That statement softened Harry significantly.

Regulus watched them become friends with tender enjoyment. Harry and Luna had the feeling of kindred spirits, both lonely in their own unique ways. It also gave Regulus his first opportunity to let his mind wander back to the plans he had before moving into the Leaky Cauldron.

He had spent the days leading up to Luna’s visit thinking about how he could use the principles of warding to create an object that could protect Harry wherever he went. He was trying to do research without being too obvious, but he’d hit a wall and needed better access to information.

He had discovered a week earlier, in a simple book on protective amulets, that the best way to create protection devices was to use blood magic. Given the legal grey area that was blood magic, there was only one place he would be able to find more information on the topic: Knockturn Alley.

He originally wasn’t keen to leave Harry alone, even in Diagon Alley, but Luna’s arrival gave him a unique opportunity. While Harry had promised to be careful, there was no telling what he would do when left to his own devices. It was clear that he had very little self-preservation instincts. But with Luna present, Regulus knew that Harry would be much more cautious. There was no way Harry would risk putting Luna in danger if he could avoid it, so Regulus finally felt comfortable leaving Harry alone for an afternoon.

“Stay where someone can see you, okay?” He said once again. He aimed the statement at both of them, but they all knew it was Harry he was really speaking to. “Stay in public. Don’t go down any alleys. Do not follow me. If you go back to the Leaky Cauldron, make sure Tom knows you’re there.”

Luna listened diligently, nodding her head after every sentence. Harry on the other hand rolled his eyes and shook his head, though there was a smile tugging at his lips.

“Are you listening? I don’t want to come back and find out you’ve gone missing,” Regulus said. He was unintentionally working himself up into a panicked state, but Harry seemed unbothered.

“Yes, I’m listening. We will stay in public. It’s going to be fine, nothing has happened so far and we’re just planning to stay here the rest of the afternoon,” Harry said, gesturing to the ice cream parlor.

“Okay, okay,” Regulus mumbled. “Just be careful, okay?”

Harry rolled his eyes again, giving Luna a knowing look. Luna smiled back at him like they were sharing a private joke. “Yes *Dad*,” he said with a chuckle.

“Right,” Regulus said breathlessly. “I’ll just see you later then.” The last sentence was barely out of his mouth before he stumbled away. *Dad, Dad, Dad*, echoed repeatedly in his head. He was almost positive that he was going to have a full panic attack about that later, but for now, he had somewhere to be.

It was a Monday afternoon, so Knockturn Alley was uncomfortably barren. A few wizards were lingering in dark corners or huddled against the brick walls, but most of them barely paid him any mind. There weren’t any specific shops in Knockturn that only sold books, so he had to settle for the few resellers in the area that specialized in dark or cursed artifacts.

Borgin and Burkes was always a safe choice. The shop had been there since the late 1800s and had always had a reputation for buying and selling practically anything one could imagine. He remembered Pandora talking about her cousin that ran the shop while they were at Hogwarts. Though she was Burke herself, she was always a little distant from her family. The Burkes weren’t as intense about keeping their family in line as the Blacks were, but it was still obvious that Pandora was a bit of an outcast.

He entered the shop, intending to speak with the shop owner right away, but opted to browse the shelves when he noticed a few other people in the shop. He didn’t look directly at any of them, doing his best to not look suspicious. This plan was ruined when none other than Draco Malfoy approached him.

“What are you doing here?” Draco said in a haughty, pureblood tone.

Regulus sighed. Of course, Draco was here. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” He responded, crossing his arms and looking down his nose at Draco.

“Do you really think it’s safe for you to be out and about?” Draco asked, his voice clearly mocking. “What with your *father* on the loose?” He raised his eyebrows when he said the word father, unsubtly reminding Regulus about his suspicions.

“Oh, I didn’t know you cared so much, Draco,” Regulus responded, sneering at the boy.

“I *don’t* care,” Draco said furiously. “Black can kill you for all I care.”

Regulus rolled his eyes dramatically. “I’d like to see him try,” he mumbled. “Who are you even here with?” He added, looking around curiously.

“You know,” Draco said, taking a step forward so that he and Regulus were almost chest to chest, “My mother says there is no way that Sirius had a son.”

“What would she know?” Regulus asked.

Draco looked around as if to check to see if anyone else was listening before leaning in. “She said that Sirius was,” he paused and leaned in even closer, “*gay*.” He said the word in a tight whisper. He made a face like he was delivering a piece of damning evidence while also being proud to share the hottest piece of gossip he’d ever heard.

Regulus couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of him. Draco looked so much like Narcissa that Regulus almost wished they were on friendlier terms. It reminded him of when Narcissa would pull Regulus aside at family gatherings just to whisper secrets in his ear.

Draco looked very superior despite Regulus's laughter. It was clear that he believed what he was saying, but Regulus just waved him off, leaving Borgin and Burkes before he was forced to interact with Narcissa or Lucius. He would have to come back to Knockturn another day, he decided.

As he made his way back to Diagon Alley, he thought about what Draco had said. He often wondered about his brother, though he would never admit it. He remembered the summer his brother found pictures of nude muggle women in a trashcan near Grimmauld and decided to permanently stick them to the walls of his bedroom. His mother didn't allow him food for a week because of that, and he remembered her desperately trying to pry the images from the wall after his brother was disowned.

It always struck Regulus as gauche and seeing the naked women always made him thoroughly uncomfortable. He hadn't ever been sure of his own sexuality if he was honest. He remembers having a crush on one of his brother's friends when he was in his second year, but that was short-lived, and until he fell in love with James, he never much thought about dating.

It wasn't a privilege members of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black received, the benefit of dating whomever they chose. No, he always knew that a partner would be chosen for him once he was old enough to marry. Even when he spent days lounging in bed with James, he always knew it would have to end eventually. He had responsibilities and unlike his brother, he wouldn't be able to escape them.

Of course, he had a sexual relationship with Barty after James left him, but that was less about desire and more about his desperate need for comfort in the final years of his first life. He was certainly never the type of person to look at nude women, in fact, he had no memory of ever being attracted to any women, though especially not muggle women like his brother was. Though, perhaps he'd been wrong. He thought back to what Moaning Myrtle said about his brother, about how he only ever kissed girls despite the rumors. He might have been gay, though Regulus would have been the last to know.

He didn't think it was too much of an issue though. Other than Narcissa, he couldn't think of anyone that would have known his brother well enough to be privy to the intimate details of his sexuality. At least no one who was still alive. He was sure James would have known, though he never shared that information with Regulus. Some of his little friends might know, but he doubted that he would be running into any of them any time soon.

## the dementor.

### Chapter Notes

it will probably be a week or so before i can get another chapter up as i'll be traveling this weekend.

let me know what you guys think of this chapter, im very excited for poa :)

Ron and Hermione joined them on the last day of the summer holiday. Luna had visited them a few more times after the first day she spent with them, but eventually, she stopped showing up. They found out later that she had been sneaking out to see them and her father had finally figured it out.

Ron and Hermione were waiting for them at the ice cream parlor, both of them looking tanned and relaxed from their vacations. They ended up at the Magical Menagerie, a magical creature shop, so that Hermione could spend her last few birthday Galleons on a pet. It was a mess from the offset, with Ron's pathetic-looking rat being chased out of the store by an enormous ginger cat that Hermione ended up adopting only a few moments later.

He could already sense that Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, would be a problem. Regulus was not particularly fond of Scabbers, Ron's rat, but he could at least sympathize with Ron's desire to keep his pet safe from an animal intent on killing it. Hermione seemed unbothered, more interested in pampering the cat than respecting her friends.

They ended up back at the Leaky Cauldron a bit later to find Arthur Weasley reading the Daily Prophet at the bar.

"Harry, Regulus," he greeted in turn. "How are you?" Regulus had been worried about Ron's parents' reactions to him, with his brother now on the loose, but Arthur seemed unbothered, at least for the moment.

On the front of the paper was his brother's screaming face, haunting Regulus's every moment. "They still haven't caught him, then?" Harry asked, shooting Regulus a troubled look. Arthur looked grave as he nodded, explaining that they had been pulled off their normal jobs to help with the search.

"Would we get a reward if we caught him?" Ron asked, though his hopeful statement was shuttered when he looked at Regulus as if just then realizing who the escaped man was to his friend.

Regulus wasn't particularly interested in listening to them talk about it. He was tired of looking at his brother's face, and though he wanted Harry to be safe, there was a small part of



him that hoped his brother wouldn't be caught. Regulus wanted the opportunity to kill him himself. It wouldn't bring James back, but if he could make sure that his brother paid the price for his betrayal, then maybe Regulus could feel some semblance of peace.

That night, all of them gathered together to eat dinner and Regulus listened idly as they talked about the plans for the next day. Everything seemed normal except Regulus kept catching Molly watching him with an unsettled look in her eye. Every time he made eye contact with her, she would look away, but the suspicious look on her face never quite departed. It made Regulus feel on edge, though he wasn't sure why.

The next morning was non-stop chaos, each of them trying to pack and get loaded into the Ministry cars to get to the train on time. Regulus barely had time to focus on anything before they made it onto the train. They were so late that it was already slowly pulling out of the station. Luna appeared behind them at some point, greeting them all softly. Harry seemed disturbed and pensive.

"I need to tell you something," he said to all of them. Ron and Hermione shared a look and nodded. They wandered down the train cars before finally settling on a mostly empty cabin. There was an adult man sleeping inside, but given that everywhere else was full, it was their only option. Regulus didn't get a good look at the man before he turned to latch the door behind them.

"Who is that?" Ron whispered. Regulus turned to look just as Hermione spoke.

"Professor R. J. Lupin," Hermione whispered in reply.

"Did you say Lupin?" Regulus blurted out and, for the first time, got a good look at the man sleeping. He was pale and sickly, wearing shabby robes with patches haphazardly sewn onto them. Despite his graying hair and scarred face, Regulus recognized him immediately. "Oh, Merlin," he mumbled.

"Do you know him?" Hermione asked, looking like a bird that just spotted its prey.

"No exactly," Regulus responded, finally taking a seat. Luna was sat next to him, with Harry closest to the window. Hermione and Ron sat across from them, next to the sleeping professor.

Regulus hadn't thought about Lupin in a long time, not in any certain terms at least. He remembered watching him at school, the way his brother would trail after him like a lost puppy. Lupin always seemed slightly divorced from the rest of his friends, as if he needed to keep his distance for his own safety. Given how James and his brother's lives turned out, he was probably correct. That wasn't even considering their other little friend, who'd been obliterated by his brother after James was killed.

Regulus looked up to inspect the case where Hermione read his name. It had *Professor R. J. Lupin* stamped on the side in peeling letters. The letters struck Regulus as odd. They looked like they had been painted on years and years ago, like the case was a treasured relic rather than something new he purchased for his position at Hogwarts. He wondered if he was a

professor elsewhere first, though given the state of his clothes, he didn't think that Lupin had been working much as of late.

He did his best to bury the memories of seeing Lupin in school, they were too painful to look at directly, the way they were intertwined with his brother and James. It was hard to think of their time at Hogwarts, when his brother seemed so free and happy, even as he ignored Regulus and disregarded his familial responsibilities. But seeing Lupin on the Hogwarts Express made this difficult. He wondered how the man felt coming back to the place he met the man who would ruin all of their lives.

That wasn't the only reason for burying the memories though, because even as he stared at the greying man, he couldn't help but remember his misguided childhood crush that he had on Lupin when he first saw him. He wasn't an ugly man, in fact, if Regulus was inclined, he might call him ruggedly handsome, but he felt a twinge of embarrassment when he remembered his eleven-year-old feelings for him.

"I wonder what he's going to teach?" Ron asked curiously, pulling Regulus from his thoughts.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts probably," Hermione answered. "It's the only class available."

"He doesn't look very well, does he?" Luna asked, a troubled frown on her lips.

"Looks like one good hex would finish him off," Ron added with a nod. "Anyway, what were you going to tell us?" He turned to look at Harry.

Harry took a long deep breath before giving Regulus a slightly apologetic look. Regulus shrugged back at him, giving him permission. He knew that Harry still felt uncertain about everything Regulus had told him about his brother, but Regulus believed that Harry would be better off telling all of their friends rather than keeping it all to himself. It was more stress than any thirteen-year-old should be forced to deal with alone.

He launched into an explanation about what Regulus had told him, that his brother was out of prison and possibly after Harry. He added the details he overheard from Ron's parents the night before, the fact that Arthur was especially worried, but that Molly didn't want to tell Harry anything, that he was better left in the dark.

"Sirius Black is after you?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Yes, and that's not all," Harry mumbled before looking at Regulus with a renewed look of guilt. "Mrs. Weasley said, well, okay, what she said was," Harry stumbled over his words painfully.

"It's fine, Harry," Regulus soothed, feeling like he already knew what Harry was going to say. "Just say it."

"She's nervous about us spending time with you," Harry said apologetically.

“What?” Hermione yelled.

“She said that?” Ron yelled at the same time.

“Oh, because you’re related to Sirius,” Luna said, masterfully working in the truth she knew with the lie he was living. “That makes sense.”

“Luna,” Harry gasped, looking like she’d just stabbed him. Regulus understood her though. She wasn’t saying that she agreed with it, but she could see Molly’s point of view.

“It’s fine,” Regulus said. “She doesn’t mean it like that. Besides Molly, er, Mrs. Weasley, is just watching out for you. She just wants you safe.”

“But she knows you’re our friend,” Ron argued, looking horrified. “You’re always lecturing us about staying safe.”

“I don’t lecture you,” Regulus said, rolling his eyes, though perhaps Ron was right.

“Do you think Sirius Black is going to try and hurt you?” Hermione asked. She had an unreadable look on her face.

“Surely he wouldn’t hurt his own son,” Ron said uncertainly.

“Well, your dad said that he was mad, so who knows how he might act,” Harry replied.

“Perhaps he will just try to kidnap you,” Luna added. “Or use you to get to Harry.”

“What if he isn’t after me at all?” Harry said, his voice edging into hysteria. “What if everyone is just trying to keep me safe, but he’s really after Regulus?”

“Oh no,” Hermione said, cupping her hand around her mouth in horror.

Regulus felt like the conversation was getting away from him. “It’s fine. I’m fine. I don’t think I’m in any danger,” he said, waving his hands frantically to get them to calm down. “He probably doesn’t even know that I go to Hogwarts.”

All of them seemed inclined to argue with him but were luckily interrupted by Harry’s Sneakoscope going off. Lupin shifted in his sleep a moment later and the conversation was put to rest for the time being. He could tell that none of them were settled though as they each kept giving him worried looks as the afternoon progressed. They narrowly avoided a confrontation with Draco, him and his two friends Crabbe and Goyle only deterred by the presence of the sleeping teacher.

When the sun set, the rain began. It pelted against the windows loudly, the sound so intense that it seemed to echo in the train car. It was nearly impossible to see out into the landscape, the rain and darkness clouding the windows. It was unusually comforting for Regulus, the sounds nearly lulling him to sleep. Luna was way ahead of him, having switched places with Harry, so she could lean her head against the window, dead to the world for the past two hours when the train ground to a halt.

“Why are we stopping?” Hermione asked, looking at her watch. “We can’t be there yet.” Harry, who was now sitting closest to the door, stood up to check the hallway. He was still standing with his head sticking out of the open doorway when the lights shut off. The air was growing cold like winter was seeping in through the walls several months early.

There was a flurry of people in their cabin, Neville and Ginny tumbling in and trying to find a place to sit in the already crowded room. They all bickered back and forth, and Regulus felt Luna jolt awake behind him.

“Mum?” She said quietly, her tiny voice shaking slightly. Regulus wanted to turn and look at her, but he was frozen in place. The cold felt like it was infecting his lungs, pulling each breath from him in a painful attack. It reminded him of how it felt to drown, how the cold water felt infiltrating his lungs, burning and aching all while his vision grew dim and his heart rattled around in a panicked flurry.

“Quiet!” Lupin said, the noises finally waking him from his long nap.

Regulus had forgotten that Lupin was there. He felt, for a moment, like he was back in the cave. He looked around the cabin and noticed that each of the children with him were frozen just as he was, looking pale and stricken. Their breath showed in the cold air and Regulus could feel Luna shivering beside him.

Lupin lit up a handful of blue fire and looked around at them, his eyes appearing alert and wary. “Stay where you are,” he told them. Just as he spoke, the door began to slide open. In the doorway was something Regulus hoped he would never see. It was a cloaked figure, so tall that its head touched the ceiling. Its face was covered, but its skeletal hands were visible from beneath the black cloak. The dementor leaned menacingly through the doorway.

Regulus felt like he was choking. He thought about the time when he was nine years old, a few months before his brother was supposed to leave for Hogwarts, when his brother was cursed by their mother, so that he was unable to open his mouth. He couldn’t remember what his brother had done to earn the punishment, all he could recall was the desperate look in his brother’s eyes as he begged for help, help that would never come. Regulus could offer nothing, could only sit next to him in silence as his brother suffered for days on end.

He tried to take a deep breath, but he felt like he had a band curled around his ribs. He thought of James at home with Lily and Harry, the moment when he realized that Regulus’s brother had betrayed them. He thought about how afraid he must have felt, that he was out of options, that he would die without knowing what would happen to Lily or Harry. There was no way Regulus could have experienced that memory, and yet he felt like he was living it, like it was his experience. Like he wasn’t just Regulus any longer, but James too, like they were one.

The dementor took a long rattling breath, looking like it was focused on Harry specifically, though they all gasped in agony together. Regulus watched as Harry’s eyes rolled back into his head, his breath catching ominously in his chest. Regulus reached out to him, trying to curl his fingers around Harry’s clothes, to pull him closer, pull him away from the dementor, but he could barely move. His hands shook dangerously, and as he watched Harry’s limp

body was replaced with James's, his eyes wide and vacant, death obvious in his shallow skin.

"No, no, no," Regulus cried. His fingers cramped as he tried to grasp James. "Please, no, please." He couldn't believe this was happening. Why was he seeing this? James had been gone for a long time, and yet it felt like Regulus had just lost him. Regulus never had to live through James's death. He was alive when Regulus died and gone by the time Regulus clawed his way out of the cave. It felt easier to forget that James wasn't just alive somewhere out in the world when Regulus wasn't confronted with his dead body.

*"Expecto Patronum."* Regulus heard a voice speak, but he didn't look over. His James was dead, right in front of him, how come no one else was as panicked as he was? How come no one else was grieving? A bright light drew his attention and looked over to see a giant glowing wolf chase the dementor away from the doorway.

The air cleared immediately. The pressure on his chest lightened and Regulus sucked in a breath so fast that he nearly choked on it. James melted away before him and an unconscious Harry replaced him, sliding to the side and angling toward the floor. Right, Regulus thought, his James was long gone, but Harry was still here and Harry needed his help.

Regulus supported him as best he could, lowering Harry slowly to the ground until he was laying on his back.

"Oh, what happened? What was that thing?" Hermione said frantically. Regulus knelt next to Harry and gently tapped his cheek to wake him. He'd never encountered a dementor before, he had never even bothered to look up their effects, so he felt completely unprepared for how they would affect him. Harry's response was especially concerning given how clammy and unresponsive he was.

"It was a dementor, one of the guards of Azkaban," Lupin answered, but Regulus did not look up to listen to him. Harry's eyes were beginning to flutter. Regulus kept one hand on Harry's face and the other on Harry's shoulder to steady him when he woke up.

"W-what?" Harry mumbled when he finally opened his eyes. "What happened?"

"You fainted," Regulus answered. "Do you want to get up?" Harry nodded and Regulus, along with Ron, helped heave him into his seat.

"Are you okay?" Ron asked nervously.

"Yeah," Harry looked around the room. Regulus finally took in everyone as well. Neville was sitting with his back against the window, looking like he was a moment away from being sick. Hermione had her arm around Ginny's shoulders. Ron was now seated next to Luna, who had drying tear tracks on her cheeks. Regulus stayed kneeling in front of Harry. "Who screamed?" Harry asked.

"No one," Regulus answered, though he wasn't totally sure. He felt like someone had just scooped out his soul momentarily before giving it back to him.

“But I heard screaming,” Harry mumbled. He was cut off when a loud snap made them all jump. Lupin was breaking a huge piece of chocolate into pieces.

“Here, eat this, it will help,” Lupin said, passing out the chocolate pieces to each of them. Regulus took it without looking up, opting to keep his hair shielding his face. “Excuse me, I need to speak to the driver.”

The other kids talked about how they felt while the dementor was there, but Regulus could hardly listen. It was clear that it had a profound effect on Harry, enough that he had passed out when no one else had. But why? He needed to research the creatures more, he needed to understand why. Like always, he felt like he was missing something like there was something just out of reach.

“We’ll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes,” Lupin said once he returned. “Are you all right, Harry?”

Of course, Lupin would know Harry’s name. He wondered how quickly he had recognized him, given how much he resembled his father. What struck Regulus as odd was the fact that Harry didn’t know Lupin. Lupin was obviously friends with James, one would think that he’d been around while Harry was a child or bothered to stay in touch with his friend’s orphan son. Regulus looked him in the face for the first since the man woke. Lupin looked back with a stricken expression.

“You-you’re — ” he stuttered. Regulus wasn’t sure how to respond but wasn’t given the opportunity regardless, as Harry was on his feet so fast that he nearly knocked Regulus over.

“He has nothing to do with his father,” Harry said fiercely.

“Harry, it’s fine,” Regulus soothed, standing up as well.

“No, it’s not okay. It’s not his fault that his father’s a madman,” Harry replied. Regulus felt an uncomfortable laugh bubble up out of him. He hadn’t realized how strongly Harry felt about the situation, but in retrospect it made sense. Harry was so protective of his friends and Molly had already put him on his guard.

“Your father?” Remus asked, staring at Regulus like he was seeing a ghost, and in a way he was. “Sirius Black? He’s your father?”

“It’s not his fault,” Harry repeated before Regulus could answer.

Regulus watched in real time as a piece of Lupin’s soul broke behind his eyes. Oh, of course, was all Regulus could think. It all made sense to him now. The rumor about his brother being gay, his brother trailing after Lupin while they were at Hogwarts, the haunted look on Lupin’s face. They had been together, possibly leading up to James and Lily’s deaths, which meant the only way for Regulus Black III to exist was for Regulus’s brother to cheat on Lupin.

“Excuse me,” Remus mumbled and disappeared out the door again. How odd, Regulus thought, that this would be the thing to break the already broken-looking man. Not the fact that his lover had turned out to be a murderous traitor, but the fact that he’d sired an

illegitimate son. Of course, his brother never actually did that, but it hardly mattered now. He was still a murderer and a traitor. He wondered what Lupin thought about his brother after all these years, how he could let himself still be hurt by the actions of a man long proved evil.

Harry looked irritated watching Lupin run away, but the others just looked confused. "You don't have to defend me like that," Regulus said quietly. "A lot of people will probably share his opinion, it's not a big deal. They'll catch my father eventually, and it'll all blow over."

Harry did not look convinced but fell onto the bench with a huff. Regulus sat down as well, but he couldn't relax. He noticed for the first time that Hermione's face had turned into one of penetrating awareness, her eyes sharp and discerning. Regulus knew it wouldn't be long before he would be confronted with that specific issue, but for now, he tried to brush it off.

He had bigger problems, most notably, the fact that Lupin was still very obviously and very painfully in love with his brother.

# the boggart.

## Chapter Notes

i am finally back after traveling. sometimes visiting family is genuinely terrible :)

The carriage ride to Hogwarts was almost completely silent. Ron, Hermione, Harry, Regulus, and Luna all piled into one carriage and sat quietly, listening as the rain heavily drenched the covering. Luna hadn't dried her tears, and Regulus could still see the faint tracks that they left on her cheeks. He already knew that the memory of her calling out for Pandora was going to haunt him for years to come. He wondered if she was there when Pandora died, he'd never asked her and found himself regretting it.

Even worse than that, Regulus felt haunted by his own memories. It was clear that the dementor was pulling them out of him, shoving them in front of his eyes just to torment him. The one of James's last night was especially strange. It seemed like a memory, but that would be impossible and surely it was all just what he imagined James's last moments to be. Regardless, the thought of James being afraid for his wife and child, afraid of death at his doorstep, made Regulus shudder uncomfortably. He wondered if James thought of Regulus in his last moments if Regulus ever crossed his mind, but the thought was almost too painful to consider.

His thoughts drifted unwillingly to his brother. Sirius, he thought for the first time in weeks, his brother, who had been subjected to the dementors for years and years. He was so sure that he deserved it. If anything, when Regulus first learned of what Sirius had done, he felt like Sirius deserved worse than Azkaban, that he deserved to be tortured to death. But now, he couldn't justify the old feelings of anger, rage, and grief.

Sirius had spent years reliving his worst memories and knowing what their childhood was like, there had to be a lot of them. Not to mention all the terrible decisions he'd made as an adult that led to his stint in Azkaban. It made him ache regretfully thinking of Sirius curled up in a cold cell reliving every time his mother beat him until he was unconscious or starved him until his hands shook. Regulus was having trouble imagining the Sirius that was pictured on the cover of every Daily Prophet for the last few months, instead, he could only imagine the Sirius who used to sneak him treats on Christmas morning.

He didn't realize it at the moment, but later he would recognize that the carriage ride to Hogwarts was the moment he made the decision not to kill his brother for revenge, because revenge had surely been had. No, he decided, he would kill him not because Sirius deserved it, but because, after everything, he needed freedom. He would kill him because it had finally been enough, he would put him out of his long-lived misery. There was no hatred, it was impossible to hold onto, only pity and sorrow.



“Is Longbottom telling the truth?” Draco’s voice pulled him back to the present moment. “You actually fainted?” Draco was laughing menacingly, but Regulus was almost positive that he saw a tinge of worry behind Draco’s eyes.

“Shove off, Malfoy,” Ron said, pushing passed the boy.

Lupin thankfully intervened before their petty argument could go any further, but Regulus noticed that Lupin was curiously avoiding his eye. He wondered how the professor was feeling, how the dementors would affect someone like him. He looked bone tired despite having slept the entire train ride to Hogwarts.

“Potter! Granger! I want to see you both,” McGonagall's voice called the moment they entered the Entrance Hall. Regulus waved them off as he pulled Ron into the Great Hall. Luna separated from them and headed to a spot at the Ravenclaw table.

“Wonder what that’s about,” Ron muttered.

“Not sure, maybe Lupin owled ahead about Harry passing out on the train?” Regulus questioned. “I don’t know about Hermione thought.” Ron hummed curiously.

They watched idly as the new first years were sorted. Regulus didn’t recognize any of them, but there were a few names here and there that he thought he’d heard before. It was mostly just boring, and he felt like he was struggling to keep his eyes open by the time the sorting was finished.

Harry and Hermione finally rejoined them once the sorting was over. Hermione looked sad that they’d missed the sorting, but Harry just looked mildly irritated and annoyed.

“What did McGonagall want?” Regulus asked.

Harry explained how she had Madam Pomfrey there to check Harry over. It turned out that Madam Pomfrey and McGonagall were just as irritated by the presence of dementors at the school as everyone else seemed to be. Regulus was inclined to agree, Sirius Black on the loose or not, given how Harry reacted. Dementors were incredibly dangerous it seemed, especially considering the fact that they would attack any person whether it was the person they were looking for or not.

Ron nodded along as Harry explained before looking at Hermione expectantly. A bright red blush spread across Hermione’s cheeks, and she opened her mouth as if to answer but no sound came out. Harry looked curious as well, but before Hermione could come up with something to say, Dumbledore began to speak.

The warning about the dementors seemed pointless given the fact that so many of them had come face to face with the creatures on the train ride here. “Dementors cannot be fooled by tricks or disguises or even Invisibility Cloaks,” Dumbledore said. It all seemed a little heavy-handed, though obviously important for Harry specifically to hear. The idea that they couldn’t be tricked though interested Regulus. How did Sirius manage to evade them for this long if they could not be fooled?

“It is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I, therefore, warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you,” Dumbledore added. His ever-cheerful tone paired with the ominous warning made Regulus shiver slightly. He hated the idea of those creatures lurking right outside of the Hogwarts grounds.

After his warning, Dumbledore introduced Lupin as their new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, not a surprise, though Regulus was very curious about how that would go. He had no idea how he would be able to manage to be in class with a man who knew his brother back in school. It was one thing being in Snape’s class, given how little Snape seemed to care about his students, but Regulus worried that Remus might be too observant. Then again he could be too overwhelmed by Sirius’s made-up infidelity to realize who Regulus truly was.

Snape, Regulus noticed, looked especially annoyed by Remus’s presence. He was staring at Lupin as if Lupin had just slapped him in the face. He knew that Snape coveted the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, but this seemed far more personal. Obviously, Snape hated James and Sirius, but Regulus struggled to remember his feelings about Lupin specifically. Lupin wasn’t loud or arrogant at school, he was quiet and easily overshadowed. He swore that Snape used to complain about Lupin, but Regulus could not for the life of him remember what the subject of those complaints was.

Dumbledore also announced the new appointment of a professor for Care of Magical Creatures, none other than the expelled student, Hagrid. Regulus wondered if the discovery of Tom Riddle’s lies had finally vindicated Hagrid’s existence in the wizarding world. Loud applause filled the Great Hall after the announcement, lead strongly by Harry, Ron, and Hermione. After that, their plates and goblets filled with food and drinks, and they all tucked in.

On their way to breakfast the next morning, McGonagall pulled Regulus aside before he could enter the Great Hall.

“I have some unfortunate news,” she told him once they were in her office. “I know that your mother provided you with permission to attend Hogsmeade with the other third-years, but I, along with Dumbledore, do not believe it would be in your best interest to allow you to go.”

“I’m sorry?” Regulus asked, feeling like he was trying to catch up with a conversation he was not prepared to have.

“Given the present danger your father poses, it could put you and other students in danger if you were allowed to go to Hogsmeade, so until he is caught, you will have to stay on the Hogwarts Grounds.”

“Sirius, my father, isn’t after me,” Regulus argued. “I doubt he would even know who I was.”

“That may well be, but the fact still stands that he could hurt you if he sees you,” McGonagall said, her face firm and unyielding. Regulus could already tell that she would not be swayed. He sighed and did his best not to argue, nodding sullenly and leaving the moment she dismissed him.

“Most of the prisoners go mad in there,” Regulus heard George Weasley say as he walked to join his friends at the Gryffindor table. Regulus swallowed hard, he didn’t want to think about dementors or Azkaban ever again, but especially not first thing in the morning.

“What was that about?” Harry asked the moment Regulus was sitting.

“She was just informing me that I’m not allowed to go to Hogsmeade this year,” Regulus said dismissively, starting to place several pieces of toast on his plate.

“What?” He wasn’t sure who exactly yelled, given that it sounded like multiple people. Ron, Fred, and George all looked shocked, Hermione looked unsurprised, yet sympathetic, while Harry just looked angry.

“She can’t do that!” Ron said loudly.

“Apparently, she can,” Regulus said. “It’s not a big deal. Once they catch my father, then I’ll be allowed to go.”

Finally, their new schedules were passed out and the conversation was abandoned in lieu of discovering what subjects they had first. Ron was busy questioning Hermione about her overloaded schedule when Harry leaned over to whisper in his ear.

“I’m sorry about Hogsmeade,” Harry said sincerely.

“That’s okay,” Regulus replied with a shrug. “I’ll get to go eventually. At least we’ll both be stuck here, right?” Harry smiled lightly.

Their first class was Divination, which Regulus was extremely curious about. He knew that Divination was a difficult subject to teach and that if a person had no natural talent for the subject, they would most likely have to drop the course, so he was interested to see how he would fair in the class. His last class of the day was Muggle Studies, which Regulus would never admit out loud, but he was very excited for. The only assignment for Muggle Studies had been to read the first chapter of their textbook, but Regulus had read the entire thing front to back in the weeks before schools started.

It turned out that Regulus should have been more worried about Divination, as the first class was a mess. After making several small, ominous predictions, one of them coming true almost immediately, she instructed them to break into pairs to read each other’s tea leaves.

“Where did Hermione go?” Ron asked as they walked back to their table after filling their tea cups. Harry and Regulus shrugged helplessly.

“How does she expect us to drink this? It’s scalding hot,” Harry grumbled. Regulus snickered when Harry gingerly tried to take a sip and pulled back a second later sputtering. It took them several minutes of blowing on the liquid before it was safe enough to drink.

“Right, what do you see in mine?” Regulus asked Ron. They hadn’t bothered to separate into pairs, instead working in a group of three and hoping Trelawney wouldn’t notice.

“Wet tea leaves mostly,” Ron responded and Harry chuckled.

“Broaden your minds, my dears,” Trelawney interrupted. “Allow your eyes to see past the mundane!” Ron took a deep solidifying breath before blinking hard like he was struggling to focus.

“You have a heart in the center, that’s love,” Ron said, looking back and forth between his book and cup with a curious look on his face. The smell of incense in the room was clouding Regulus’s thoughts, making him feel tired and sluggish. “The heart is under some kind of bridge or,” Ron paused, “like an archway. That’s... a new beginning or an ending. So you’re going find love or end love?” He said the final words trailing off into uncertainty.

“All right,” Regulus mumbled, “good to know.” He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He knew that Divination was an inexact science, but this was just ridiculous.

“You have worms,” Ron said suddenly.

“I’m sorry?” Regulus asked, his voice just barely loud enough to be heard over Harry's sudden laughter. Ron looked a little embarrassed himself, a light blush spreading across his cheeks.

“I think they’re worms,” Ron corrected. “I think it means you have a secret enemy.”

“It can mean that,” Trelawney said suddenly, appearing beside him. “It can also represent death, renewal, and rebirth. Do you feel close to death?” She asked him, peering into his eyes.

“Not particularly,” Regulus said, though he stumbled over the words in a way that made it clear he wasn’t sure. He often felt close to death. Since he was brought back by some unknown method, he felt like he was living right on the fringes between life and death. Like he was stealing time that wasn’t his and at any moment, magic herself would come to collect.

“Hmmm,” she said with an unsteady nod, her head bobbing from side to side in an uncanny fashion. She moseyed away from them, drifting as if the incense-filled air was carrying her away.

“What about mine?” Ron asked Harry. Harry gave Trelawney one more odd look before pulling Ron’s cup closer to him.

“You have some sort of crooked cross,” he said and Regulus tuned him out for the moment. His thoughts drifted to the heart, archway, and worms in his cup. He wasn’t sure that they meant anything, he doubted Ron had a great talent for Divination, but they still unsettled him for some reason. The archway was tight and boxy, looking almost like a fully formed door. As Regulus stared, it almost looked like the lopsided heart in the center began to beat.

“Regulus,” Harry said, his voice pulling him from his staring. Regulus looked up to see Harry watching him with patient eyes. “What do you see in my cup?”

“Right,” Regulus said, pulling up the cup so he could get a good look at it. It just looked like blobs. He wasn’t sure how Ron and Harry had seen anything in their cup beyond soggy

brown leaves. "I think..." Regulus trailed off, turning the cup counterclockwise slowly. "It might be some kind of animal, but I can't be sure."

"Let me see that, my dear," Trelawney said, grabbing the cup out of his fingers without any preamble.

"Go ahead," Regulus said sardonically.

"The falcon," Trelawney said with grave importance. "You have a deadly enemy."

Hermione's shrill voice cut through the eerie silence, declaring that everyone knows that, and though Regulus was inclined to agree, he was too distracted by her sudden appearance to respond. Witnessing Trelawney's next set of predictions was like watching a train derailment in real-time. The club, for an attack, the skull, for danger, and finally, the Grim.

The room erupted into gasps when Trelawney said and though Hermione immediately argued with the woman, it was clear that Harry was shaken. His face had paled considerably and he was looking at his cup with haunted eyes. It reminded Regulus of the moment in the bookstore when Harry was staring at the Grim on the cover of another Divination book.

Things were eased a bit when McGonagall told them that Trelawney had predicted a student's death in her first class every single year since she started teaching. However, Harry still looked odd and unsettled.

"Is everything okay?" Regulus asked as they were leaving their class. "You don't look well."

"Harry," Ron said when Harry didn't reply right away. "Have you seen a great black dog somewhere?"

Harry looked deeply uncomfortable for a moment. "Yeah, I have. I saw one the night I left the Dursleys." This was news to Regulus and though Ron and Hermione quickly devolved into a fight about Hermione's lack of talent with Divination, Regulus continued to watch Harry closely.

"Is that why you were staring at it in the bookstore?" Regulus asked quietly. Harry gave a slight nod. "I'm sure it's nothing."

Harry gave him a disbelieving look. "How can it be nothing? I saw the Grim, and I've almost died the last two years at Hogwarts. Maybe this time Voldemort will finally finish the job."

"Harry," Regulus said, rolling his eyes. He did his best to ignore the way his stomach clenched painfully thinking about the near-constant danger Harry was in.

"Or Sirius Black," Harry added in a harsh whisper, his voice edging into mania before a look of discomfort crossed his face. "Sorry."

"It's fine. You're not going to die. Besides, the legend of the Grim is that the person dies within a day, and since you saw it months ago, I hardly think it's sticking around just to taunt you."

“If you say so,” Harry mumbled, though he didn’t look convinced.

They had Care of Magical Creatures after lunch and it went just as poorly as Divination, with Draco being mauled by a Hippogriff after insulting it to its face. It was so clear to Regulus that Draco was just acting up to get Harry’s attention, and Regulus felt a terrible embarrassment for the boy. The attack didn’t bode well for the rest of the semester, nor for Hagrid’s career at Hogwarts.

By the time Regulus went to Muggle Studies, he’d lost all the excitement he’d felt that morning. He walked with Hermione up to the classroom, tucked away from the rest of the school as if they were trying to hide it, and sat through a very boring introduction to the class. This school year was shaping up to be such a mess that Regulus already felt overwhelmed.

Draco didn’t show back up in class until Thursday and by then they had all settled into their routine, at least for the most part. They still had yet to have a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, and Regulus was both nervous and excited to see how Lupin ran his classroom. Their last two Defense professors were so incompetent that they’d barely learned anything. They would most likely struggle when fifth year came around and they had to take O.W.L.s with barely any prep.

Lupin led them out of the classroom right when they arrived and walked them to the staffroom nearby. Snape was sitting in one of the armchairs when they entered and left the room swiftly once he realized that Lupin was bringing the entire class into the room. He strode out with a quick snide comment about Neville and Hermione, that made Lupin raise his eyebrows in surprise.

When Regulus found out that they were meant to be facing a boggart, he just about left the room. He had only come face to face with one a few times, and each time it appeared as something different, his mother, his cousin, and the Dark Lord.

He had no idea what this one would take the shape of, but he worried that it would give him away. If it turned into his brother, then everyone might not question it, but Regulus wasn’t sure that he was really scared of Sirius, even despite how insane he looked nowadays. It could still turn into the Dark Lord, as the fear Regulus felt was still fresh like an open wound. That wouldn’t be terribly suspicious unless, of course, the Dark Lord looked as he did before he was destroyed.

His biggest worry was that the boggart would take the shape of James, eyes wide and vacant, death hanging around him like a cloak. That would be especially difficult to explain away. As the students lined up against the wall, Regulus did his best to stand off to the side, so as not to draw attention.

Lupin began calling out various students to come forward and try the spell, *Riddikulus*. Regulus needn’t have worried so much though, as Lupin’s eyes seemed to jump over Regulus every time they came near him. It was as if the professor was doing his best to forget that Regulus was in the room. It reminded him of how Snape acted in first year, where he would refuse to even look at Regulus while teaching classes. Of course, Regulus doubted that Snape did this because he was in love with Sirius.

They finished the class without Regulus being called on at all and Regulus breathed a sigh of relief as he left the staffroom. Harry, he noticed, was looking disappointed though. Regulus hadn't realized at the time, but Harry had also been skipped over by Lupin and hadn't been allowed to come face to face with the boggart. Hermione also wasn't given a try but she only seemed mildly disappointed. Harry looked more like someone had just told him that he was getting kicked off the Quidditch team.

Regulus elbowed him and when Harry looked up, he quirked his eyebrow in question. "All right?" Regulus asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, looking away. Regulus thought he might not say anything else as he was quiet for a few long moments. "It's just why do you think he didn't let me face the boggart? Does he think I'm too *delicate*?" He said the word snidely like it was a personal insult.

"He didn't let me or Hermione face it either," Regulus told him.

"Right, right, of course," Harry agreed quickly, but Regulus could see from the line between his eyebrows that it still bothered him. He understood how Harry felt. For so much of Regulus's childhood, Sirius was the adventurous and talented one. Even after he was sorted into Gryffindor, the family still regarded Sirius as the most promising child as far as magical ability. Regulus, on the other hand, was viewed as an average wizard, and though he received good grades in school, he wasn't seen as a prodigy like Sirius was.

It was difficult to rectify the fact that you might be seen as average or even below average at something. And though Defense Against the Dark Arts was Harry's best class, there was bound to be an ounce of insecurity when he wasn't given an opportunity that his peers received. Regulus felt for him, though he was secretly grateful that Harry wasn't called on. If Harry's boggart turned into the Dark Lord, Regulus was sure he'd have had a panic attack. Not to mention if it turned into Sirius. That would have been far too much for a Thursday afternoon.

## the portrait.

Regulus settled into classes as easily as he had the previous two years. After Draco was attacked by a Hippogriff, Care of Magical Creatures became one of the most boring classes Regulus had ever taken, beaten only by Binns and History of Magic. Divination remained a spectacle, but in a way that Regulus found entertaining at the very least. Trelawney almost always mentioned Harry's impending death, and it was becoming almost a running joke among their peers.

Muggle Studies was one of Regulus's favorite classes, though he would never say that out loud. The other classes were all repeats, and Care of Magical Creatures and Divination were too ill-formed to hold any genuine interest. Muggle Studies, on the other hand, was new and fresh in a way that Regulus enjoyed.

Muggles were fascinating creatures. At first, Regulus could hardly believe everything he was learning about them. Refrigerators for instance. They couldn't use magic to keep their food cold, so they invented power just to have a giant cold box in their homes. It was ingenious. Power itself was so interesting. Electricity was such a foreign concept that Regulus nearly talked Hermione's ear off trying to understand it. Hermione, who would usually love an opportunity to explain a topic to someone, had started avoiding Regulus to escape his incessant questions.

They celebrated Hermione's birthday with a small get-together after dinner. Luna met Regulus, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville in the Gryffindor common room, and they ate snacks stolen from the kitchen. Hermione seemed unnerved by Luna, but she was polite enough.

Crookshanks continued terrorizing Scabbers, creating a very visible rift between Ron and Hermione. They were almost always on the brink of bickering with one another, and it was beginning to drive both Regulus and Harry insane. Regulus couldn't care less what happened to Scabbers, though he understood why Ron was upset. Hermione just seemed distracted, and perhaps a little put out that she was in the wrong.

On the sixteenth of October, Lavender received news that her pet at home had died, confirming a prediction Trelawney made at the beginning of the year. Apparently, her rabbit Binky was killed by a fox, and Lavender was practically in hysterics after reading the letter from her mother telling her about the death. Hermione's immediate questioning of both Lavender's worst fear, and the logistics of Binky dying well before the sixteenth made for an ugly scene.

"Don't mind Hermione, Lavender," Ron said, interrupting Hermione's lecture. "She doesn't think other people's pets matter very much." Regulus couldn't help the surprised laughter that spilled out of him. Hermione sent him a fierce glare but Regulus only shrugged.

"He's not exactly wrong," Regulus said, trying his best to keep his voice gentle. "You do let your pet chase after his without any real boundaries." Hermione's eyes immediately filled



with angry tears before she turned around in her seat, effectively ending the conversation. Regulus wasn't really trying to hurt the girl, but he did find it uncomfortable that Ron had to practically beg her to get control of her pet, just so his rat wouldn't get killed.

On the day of the first Hogsmeade weekend, Harry was moping around their dorm room as everyone dressed and prepared to go to breakfast. He'd tried to ask McGonagall to sign his permission form, egged on by Ron's insistence, but she had been just as firm with him as she had with Regulus. Regulus knew there was no chance that she would let him go, even if she was willing to break the rules about who could sign the form, not with Sirius Black on the loose.

"There's always the feast," Ron said to Harry, trying desperately to cheer up the sulking boy.

"Yeah, besides, they can bring back stuff from the village. It's a lot smaller than Diagon, but they should be able to get a good candy haul," Regulus said.

"Yeah," Harry said gloomily, "great."

Draco did his best to poke fun at Harry for staying back while the others gathered up to head to Hogsmeade, though he completely ignored Regulus, who had also not been allowed to go. He was extra insistent this year, Regulus realized, the way he attempted to nag Harry at least once a day. Harry ignored Draco more and more, and Regulus could tell that it was beginning to drive Draco insane.

"What are you going to do today?" Harry asked him as they walked up to the common room.

"Probably check out a few books from the library, and then go read them out by the lake," Regulus answered honestly.

"We're not supposed to be outside unsupervised," Harry said, parroting what Hagrid had yelled at them earlier in the year. Regulus shrugged, a small smirk playing at his lips. Harry shook his head good-naturedly.

"What about you?" Regulus asked. "Did you want to do something?"

"Nah, I'll probably just wander around," Harry answered sullenly.

"It's not so bad," Regulus said, bumping Harry's shoulder with his own. "Might be kind of fun to explore the castle when so many people have left."

"Yeah, maybe," Harry said. His voice was still laced with disappointment, but he looked slightly more mollified than before.

They parted ways the moment they reached the common room, with Colin Creevey immediately cornering Harry the instant they came through the portrait door. Regulus climbed the stairs to the dorm and gathered up his supplies for the day. The library was nearly empty when he arrived, only a few first and second years milling about, though they appeared to be mostly talking with friends rather than working.

He wished he'd thought to bring Harry's invisibility cloak. As he'd begun to search the books in the library, he realized that most of them he'd already read, and he desperately wanted to search through the restricted section. He wondered idly if there were any professors who would give him a pass to the restricted section, but since Lockhart obliviated himself last year, there wasn't anyone left that was stupid enough to give him a free pass.

He grabbed the few books he hadn't read yet and headed outside. He did his best to stick to the shadows as he crossed the grounds to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He knew it was technically dangerous to be outside, and that he would get into huge trouble if he was found, but he just didn't want to spend the day cooped up in the castle. Plus, the last thing he was worried about was running into his insane older brother.

He tucked himself away in the trees just enough that he couldn't be seen from the castle and settled in to read for a while. Since the summer at Diagon Alley, he'd been interested in creating a protective amulet that Harry could wear constantly that would keep him safe.

He feels unprepared and underqualified to make such an object, but he also didn't trust any of the ones that could be purchased on the streets of Diagon or Knockturn Alley. So many of them were just scams, overpriced, and embedded with magic that barely did anything. Not to mention the fact that almost all of the purchasable ones only used spells, charms that fade over time. Regulus was almost sure that if it was possible to create an object of real use, he would have to use a combination of runes and charms.

He knew that there were some similar objects used in old pureblood families, but these were typically made using blood magic and ancestral magic, both of which he wanted to avoid for Harry's sake. Blood magic might be the better of the two options if he had to use one though, however, it would require some level of explanation of why he needed Harry's blood.

Ancestral magic was more unpredictable in this case. He had no way of utilizing the Potter ancestral magic, not unless he could somehow access old family properties. Since Harry was the only living member of the Potters, he would have no way of anchoring the magic to anyone else. Tying powerful protective ancestral magic to an underage wizard was highly illegal and very dangerous. It could cause a continuous drain on their magic that could lead to magical core damage and even death.

All of this is why it took him so long to actually create the object. The books he was working through today all focused on the different types of materials he could use to create a protective item. It was a complicated use of alchemy that might turn out to be exorbitantly expensive, not that Regulus had any problem paying for it, especially when it came to Harry's protection.

He shivered as he read. It was unseasonably cold outside, most likely due to the constant presence of dementors lording around the perimeter of the school grounds. He was aware that it was probably irresponsible to be outside when any of them could veer off course and come after him, but he was willing to risk it.

He dug into one of the books he checked out, losing track of time quickly. It was interesting, though not terribly helpful considering it was such a rudimentary explanation of alchemy. After finishing the book, he opened his next one. This one talked about the alchemical

principles intertwined with different types of magic. Magical types had gone out of fashion years ago, so it was no doubt an old book, but he did find one piece of information that he felt could help him. Old magical families often had alchemical substances that meshed well with their specific brand of magic. If Regulus could figure out what substance was associated with the Potters, he might be able to create something of use.

He set the book down and leaned his head against the tree he was sitting next to. He had taken in so much information that he felt like his head was going to split open trying to hold it all in. He wondered what alchemical substance was associated with the Blacks. It wasn't something taught to him in childhood, which in retrospect he found unusual since it seemed the exact type of information that the Black family would love to teach their children if only to show them how *important* they all were.

He shivered again, pulling his cloak tighter around his shoulders. He should probably go inside, he thought, but just wanted a few more minutes. He was enjoying the quiet of the lake, the slight splashing noises as the water lapped the shore, the wind flowing through the leaves in quiet contemplation. It was peaceful, and if he wasn't so cold, he could see himself taking a long nap in the afternoon sun.

The cold was growing more intense though, becoming more and more distracting as the minutes ticked by. When he felt the first memory of an inferi grabbing his ankle pull at his thoughts, he decided to pack up and head back to the castle. The dementors must have been moving closer, and he did not want to be caught out alone with them.

As he quickly walked back along the shadows, another memory started to pull him under. This time it didn't feel too bad, though there was a deep sorrow that came with it that he couldn't understand. He was in a vault at Gringotts with his father, except it was not his father, not exactly. It looked like Mr. Potter, James's dad, though he never met him beyond seeing him briefly picking James up from the train. But when he looked at Mr. Potter he didn't think about Mr. Potter, no, he thought of the word Dad and safety and love. That was the most unusual of the bunch really. Regulus never dared feel safety and love for his own father, let alone anyone else's.

Mr. Potter was looking through a collection of items in their vault. Regulus was having trouble tracking what he was looking for. He could tell that Mr. Potter, Dad, not his Dad, but he couldn't detach from the feeling, was picking up items before setting them down again.

"Is this really important right now?" Regulus asked, or not Regulus, Regulus thought.

"Of course, it's important. You know your mother and I," his dad said.

"I know, don't remind me," Regulus said sullenly, cutting him off. "What exactly are you looking for? Do you know what it looks like?"

"I can't remember," Dad said. He's confused so often nowadays, and it's clear that it's frustrating him. "It was black I think. Or in a black box. I think you'll want it. Things are getting so dangerous, you need something else to safeguard you."

“Nobody else has anything for protection like this,” Regulus said. “If we don’t find it, I’m sure I’ll be okay.”

“No, James, no. You need to have something to protect you,” Dad said, turning to him with unsettled eyes.

“Okay Dad, okay,” Regulus said placatingly. “Just... rest, okay? I’ll look for it.”

The memory left him when Regulus finally made it inside the castle and managed to shut the door firmly behind him. It wasn’t his memory, that he was completely positive of. It was James’s, James was the one talking to his father in their family vault. They were looking for something, maybe something similar to what Regulus wanted for Harry.

Why would this memory come to him now? He wondered if the dementors had anything to do with it. While it wasn’t horribly traumatic like so many of the other memories pulled to the forefront of his mind by the dementors, there was an intense sadness that made Regulus feel tears prick at his eyes that came with the memory. He wondered if it was the ill health that Mr. Potter was clearly in. He knew that the Potters had died before Harry was born, but he didn’t know much about their deaths. It must have been difficult for James to deal with their illness amongst so much death and destruction during the war.

It made his chest clench painfully, thinking about James’s terrible sorrow and watching his father get confused while looking for whatever it was he was trying to find. But still, as he managed to push the feelings away, something crystalized in his mind. Somewhere in the Potter family vault, there had to be an item Regulus could use to protect Harry. He would need to find a way to get Harry to Gringotts with him. He didn’t want to wait too long and risk Harry coming face-to-face with Sirius before he had the means of protection.

He wandered back to the dorm and ran into Harry just as he was entering the portrait hole.

“Hey, want to play chess?” He asked as a way of greeting.

“Sure,” Harry said, and the two of them sat at the chessboard in front of the fire. Regulus was glad for it. The tips of his fingers still felt overly cold because of the dementors.

“What did you get up to today?” Regulus asked conversationally.

“I had tea with Professor Lupin,” Harry said happily, though there was a slightly uncertain look on his face.

“Oh?” Regulus asked surprised. “Did you go to see him?”

“No,” Harry answered quickly, looking Regulus in the eyes as if he was imploring Regulus to believe him. “He found me and asked if I wanted to join him.”

“That’s nice,” Regulus said unsteadily. “Did you think I would be mad or something?”

“Well, no, not exactly, but you know, he mentioned Sirius on the train, and I thought maybe he made you uncomfortable. He never calls on you in class, and you never talk about him even though everyone else loves him,” Harry explained, shrugging uncomfortably.

“Oh, Harry,” Regulus said, a guilty smile on his face. “It’s really okay. He’s obviously a good professor. It’s not his fault if I make him uncomfortable. He’s way nicer about it than Snape ever has been.”

Harry chuckled a little and Regulus noticed that his shoulder relaxed slightly. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“What did you guys talk about?” Regulus asked, after a few minutes of comfortable silence.

“He explained why he didn’t let me face the boggart,” Harry replied. He was sitting hunched over with his hand rubbing his chin in contemplation.

“And?” Regulus prompted after Harry was silent for a long moment.

“He said he was afraid it would turn into Voldemort, and he didn’t want to cause a panic in the class,” Harry said.

“That makes sense,” Regulus replied, feeling very proud of himself that he managed not to flinch at the name. “Would it have turned into Vo — the Dark Lord?” Okay, so he wasn’t quite past his fear completely.

“No, I don’t think so,” Harry said with a light shake of his head. “I think it would have been a dementor.”

“Right,” Regulus said, suddenly feeling mildly ill. “Of course.” Harry nodded knowingly. Regulus didn’t ever want to watch Harry come into contact with a dementor ever again. He was pretty sure that the memory of Harry slipping to the ground unconscious was going to haunt him.

“Oh!” Harry yelled out, startling Regulus from his focus. “I almost forgot. Snape came and gave Lupin this awful potion while I was there. It looked like sludge, and it was smoking, it smelled so nasty.” Harry scrunched up his nose in distaste. “I can’t believe he just drank it. I mean, he must know that Snape is interested in the Dark Arts. I’m sure it wasn’t safe.”

“That is odd,” Regulus agreed. He tried to run through his knowledge of potions, but he was struggling to place any that looked like sludge and also smoked. He would have to research it, he thought.

“What do you think it was?” Harry asked.

“Not sure,” Regulus answered honestly. “Maybe I can find it in the library or something. I bet Hermione would know,” he joked. Harry agreed wholeheartedly.

They played the rest of their game in silence and eventually, the others came back from Hogsmeade, Ron and Hermione unceremoniously dropping huge bags of candy in Harry’s lap the moment they entered the common room. Harry laughed loudly, smiling wildly at both of his friends. Regulus watched on, feeling warm from the fire and the comfort of seeing Harry look so pleased. So often he looked like a tiny adult, with the worries of the world piled on his shoulders, it was so soothing to see him look like the child he actually was.

They walked down to the Halloween feast together, Hermione and Ron regaling them with stories about Hogsmeade and the various stores they visited. Harry listened pleasantly, looking far less sulky than he had been that morning. Harry told them about his meeting with Remus, and Hermione got a curious look on her face. Regulus figured she would know what the potion was by the end of the week, he would have to ask her.

The food was delicious as always and Regulus was practically gorged on it by the time he was done. He felt sleepy and happy. Harry and Ron were still joking around, talking about what Harry wanted from Hogsmeade the next time they went. Hermione was talking quietly to Neville, who just seemed happy to have someone to speak to. Luna had come to join them at some point, sneaking over when no one was paying attention, and was resting her head on her hand, her eyelids threatening to close every few seconds, clearly exhausted after eating so much. Regulus felt safe and comfortable in the dim Halloween lighting.

They trudged up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower, their feet dragging beneath them. Regulus waved to Luna when she split off from them to head to Ravenclaw's common room. He was looking forward to going to bed, already fantasizing about curling up under the covers when he heard Percy yelling.

"Let me through, please," he yelled, his voice piercing the crowd in a way that made Regulus want to cover his ears. He continued to lecture everyone, demanding to know why no one was moving, all of them hovering outside the closed portrait. "Somebody get Professor Dumbledore," he finally said, his voice suddenly haunted. "Quick!"

Regulus barely registered the chaos around him. His eyes were locked on the portrait, as people moved and shifted around in front of him, it finally came into full view and he could finally see what was wrong. Along the front were several long scratches, destroying the portrait in a way so indicative of violence that it made him shiver.

He instinctively grabbed Harry's wrist, intent on keeping Harry next to him. Harry let him, looking worried and confused. There was only one reason that someone might attack the portrait like that. Someone had tried to get into the common room and, having been denied entry reacted in violent anger.

"Did she say who did it?" Regulus heard Dumbledore's quiet and serious voice.

Peeves's voice was muffled and difficult for Regulus to hear. It sounded like water was rushing in his ears. He already knew the answer, there could only be one answer.

"Nasty temper he's got, that Sirius Black."

## the teacup.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They are all sent to the Great Hall for the night and only a few minutes after they arrive, all the students from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin were sent in also. Luna made a beeline toward where Regulus was huddled up with Harry, Hermione, and Ron, Harry's forearm still firmly in Regulus's grasp.

"What's going on?" She asked, her voice was light and airy, but her eyes were distressed.

"Sirius Black tried to get into Gryffindor Tower," Hermione whispered furiously, her hands were shaking. Ron was pale and nervous. Regulus hadn't spoken yet, still feeling too lost in shock to do so.

Dumbledore made an announcement a moment later, letting them all know that they would be staying in the Great Hall while the professors made a full search of the castle. It did not help Regulus relax. If Sirius could get all the way up to Gryffindor Tower, then there was no telling where he could get. Who knew if he could get into the Great Hall? Regulus wasn't worried about coming across Sirius on his own, but with Harry, as well as all the children in the castle, with him, he was anxious.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags!" Percy shouted. They dragged their sleeping bags to the corner. Regulus finally let go of Harry's arm long enough to roll his out. Hermione and Luna were tucked close to the corner, one on each wall, while Ron, Harry, and Regulus crowded around them. Regulus didn't lie down. He was sure he wouldn't be able to sleep regardless, and he felt better facing the rest of the room with Hermione, Ron, Harry, and Luna behind him.

"Do you think Black's still in the castle?" Hermione asked, her voice was barely above a whisper, but it echoed in the large room.

"I don't think so," Luna answered. Regulus looked back just in time to see Hermione roll her eyes at the girl.

"Dumbledore thinks he might be," Ron said, though he sounded a little uncertain. "Maybe he ran after he attacked the Fat Lady." Harry remained quiet, his face drawn in a way that Regulus hated.

"It's very lucky he picked tonight, you know," Hermione said.

"Yes, otherwise he could have followed a student in," Luna answered. Her eyes were closed now, her face calm and relaxed, but Regulus could see where her small fingers were clenched on the end of her sleeping bag.

“Maybe he did it on purpose,” Ron said, he laid his head down heavily, a gust of air leaving his mouth in a huff.

“Why would he have done it on purpose?” Hermione asked, clear annoyance in her voice.

“I don’t know. He could have hidden in the dorms or something, waited for us to come back, and then attacked once we went to sleep.”

“Oh, that’s a cheerful thought,” Hermione responded.

“The lights are going out now!” Percy yelled, interrupting them. “I want everyone in their sleeping bags and quiet!” The candles all extinguished at once as if they were just waiting for a pompous idiot to instruct them. Whisperings could still be heard around the room periodically, but for the most part, everything was silent. Harry never said a word, he was quiet next to Regulus, laying flat on his back and staring unseeing at the enchanted ceiling.

Regulus stayed up, though he doubted there was much actual sleeping happening in the room. Regardless, he stayed sitting, his arms wrapped loosely around his legs, his head propped up on his knees. He watched the room closely, making sure there wasn’t anyone there who shouldn’t be. A teacher would come in to check on the room once every hour, but other than that, all was quiet.

Percy had been stalking around the room and whisper yelling at anyone who was still talking. He came by to tell Regulus to go to sleep, but Regulus simply ignored him. He barely felt like he was allowed to blink given the threat. Around three in the morning, Dumbledore came back and conversed quickly with him. It turned out that Sirius had attacked after the Fat Lady refused to let him in without a password. He’d gone straight to Gryffindor Tower. Was he planning to lay in wait as Ron suggested? Waiting until all of them were asleep before he killed Harry or stole him away?

Regulus clenched his hands into fists and his fingernails dug into his palms, grounding him and stalling his rising panic. Snape came in only a few moments later, his back stiff as he questioned Dumbledore. Regulus could feel the disdain radiating off of Snape as he spoke to the headmaster. Regulus wondered if he was worried. He and Sirius had hated each other back at school, and it was possible Snape was worried about facing his old enemy. Of course, they both ended up on the same side in the end, but perhaps that kind of hate lasts far longer than any war could fix.

“It seems almost impossible that Black could enter the school without inside help,” Snape said, he was speaking so quietly that Regulus almost missed it. Regulus kept completely still, but Snape still looked over at him quickly as if he was horribly aware that Regulus was listening in.

“I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it,” Dumbledore responded firmly. They were talking about Lupin, Regulus realized. Snape must have been suspicious that Lupin was helping Sirius get in. He wondered if Snape knew about Lupin’s feelings for Sirius, though if he only knew them as having been friends, then the suspicion could just come from that.



Regulus wasn't inclined to agree though. For one, if Lupin was going to help Sirius, he most likely would have done it long ago. Why help him now years and years after James and Lily were killed? For another thing, Harry had spent much of the afternoon with Lupin. Harry clearly liked and trusted Lupin. So why wouldn't Lupin just take Harry straight to Sirius if that was the plan? Additionally, Lupin would no doubt have the password to the Gryffindor Common Room, why not just give it to Sirius if he was already going to go to the trouble of helping him into the castle?

No, Regulus wasn't worried that Lupin and his pathetic feelings for Sirius would culminate in helping Sirius into the castle. Regulus didn't believe that Lupin had any ill will towards Harry. If anything, he just seemed friendly, if not a little distant. Still, Regulus was curious about why Snape couldn't parse out these reasons himself. Was he still so stuck on his childhood rivalry that he couldn't see logic? He guessed that must be the case. He'd seen how Snape treated Harry without provocation beyond a general hatred of James Potter.

"What was that all about?" Ron whispered once Snape and Dumbledore's conversation died down. Regulus looked back to see all of them had their eyes open, still lying unmoving in their sleeping bags.

They were finally allowed back to the common room in the early dawn. Regulus stomped ahead of the rest of them. Luna walked sleepily along with their group, not even bothering to head to her own dorm. None of them had gotten much sleep during the night, and it was clear they would all crash the moment they were in their beds.

When they were up in the dorm room, Regulus stopped them and went in alone. He cast a quick *homenum revelio* and when that came up empty, he finally allowed everyone to enter. Neville, Seamus, and Dean were still lingering in the common room, but Ron and Harry were waiting patiently at the door, looking completely unsurprised by Regulus's need to double-check the search the professors had already done.

Hermione had gone back to her dorm, but Luna stayed with Ron and Harry, and when he opened the door, she simply walked to Regulus's bed like she belonged there and promptly fell asleep. Regulus couldn't say exactly why it wasn't weird, but it almost made sense to him. Luna was the only one who knew who he really was, and she seemed remarkably comfortable around him and the other boys. Ron and Harry didn't question it either, acting as if Luna sleeping in the Gryffindor boys' dorm was an everyday occurrence.

Regulus didn't mind that his bed was taken, despite his exhaustion, he knew he wouldn't be getting any sleep. Once Neville, Seamus, and Dean came up to bed, and all of them were asleep, Regulus got to work on something he should have done the moment they arrived at school: warding the dorm room. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought to do it before, but he wasn't going to let any more time pass without warding the room.

He originally considered warding the entire tower, but as he mulled it over during the long night awake, he realized it would put far too much strain on his magic. He knew how to restrict a room, so only he could enter, but it was much more complicated to make it so anyone could enter but he would be alert. Ideally, he would ward it so he would only be alerted if Sirius entered the tower, but without Sirius present, it seemed far too difficult to manage.

Instead, he decided to ward the dorm room specifically, so that if anyone other than the people in the room, while he warded it, entered, then he would be alerted. More than that, he made it so they would simply be unable to. They would have to undo the wards in order to get in. This meant that Harry, Ron, Luna, Neville, Seamus, Dean, and Regulus himself would be able to enter and leave the room without issue and without alerting Regulus. Anyone else, even Hermione who was unfortunately not there with them, wouldn't be allowed in, and Regulus would feel the pull on his magic the moment they tried.

It wasn't perfect, but it would keep Sirius out. Of course, this meant Harry would only be safe as long as he was in the dorm room specifically, but Regulus could only hope that Sirius wouldn't try to attack Harry if he was in a crowded common room. He worried about Quidditch practice but just decided that he would have to go with him whenever he was out there. It would dig into his free time, but if it kept Harry safe, then it was worth it.

Once everything was in place, he sat at the foot of his bed on the floor, casting a quick *incendio* on the fire to keep the room warm. He felt like a soldier on watch, waiting for danger to pop out at any moment.

The next few days were fraught with tension, everyone was talking about Sirius Black. Draco repeatedly tried to taunt Harry about the danger he was in, but Harry simply sighed and ignored him. Regulus could tell Harry was stressed, though he was doing his best to hide it. In Muggle Studies, they finished up their section on muggle cooking, which Regulus found needlessly complicated and very messy, and moved on to the basics of cleaning. He tried to pay attention, but after Halloween, he struggled to keep track of any of his classes.

Care of Magical Creatures was as boring as ever. They now sat through long, rambling lectures about flobberworms, Hagrid looking defeated and disheartened the entire time. Regulus noticed Draco nodding off multiple times in the class, and he had the ridiculous desire to smack him in the back of the head every time it happened. More than that, they could barely prepare for the class, not that they needed to, but still, all of the books had gone missing. The Monster Book of Monsters seemed to have a mind of its own and over time his own copy disappeared from his bag. He wasn't the only one either; he noticed each class that passed had fewer and fewer students that had their copies.

In Divination, they were ramping up to the end of the section on Tasseography, but every class was still spent with them drinking way too much tea, while they were lulled into a slump by the overwhelming incense. Harry was more distracted than ever, he barely even bothered to look at their cups before picking something random out of their book and saying that was what he saw. He tried his best to keep his tea leaves hidden from Trelawney, who was always sniffing around when it was his turn.

"All right, what do you see?" Harry said tiredly as Ron looked in his cup.

Ron looked deeply uncomfortable for a long moment before a look of relief crossed his face. "I see a tree," he said, then hummed as his eyebrows furrowed. "Honestly, it kind of looks like the Whomping Willow. Maybe try to stay away from that. I also see... clouds!" he shouted. "Or at least, I think they're clouds. I think that means rain," he paused then added quickly like he even regretted the fact that he was saying it, "or a bad omen related to weather. I'm sure it's fine."

Harry sighed and looked out the window where the storm that had been building all week continued its torrential downpour. Hermione rolled her eyes so intensely that Regulus knew her head must have hurt.

Ron began twisting the cup in his hands until his eyes widened intensely. He consciously schooled his features before putting the cup down. "That's it, I think," Ron said.

"You might as well say it, otherwise Trelawney is going to come over and do it for you," Harry said sullenly. It spoke to how much Hermione disliked the class that she didn't correct Harry by telling him to call her *Professor Trelawney*.

"I see the Grim," Ron said, barely moving his mouth as he spoke. "But it could just be a big dog or another animal." Ron's reading marked the end of that round, so they got up to get more tea.

"Just skip this round," Regulus whispered to Harry as they stood to get another refill of tea. At this pace, he would have to use the bathroom five times before the end of class. Harry nodded at him and leaned heavily against the table. Hermione stayed back as well, she had taken to skipping nearly every other turn. She had absolutely no talent for Divination and, worse than that, she refused to even try when she realized she wouldn't be the best in the class.

They drank their new tea slowly, sipping it in silence as they listened to the dull rumblings of the other students attempting to read their leaves. Many of the students seemed just as apathetic about the topic as Harry did, though not for the same reasons. Only Lavender and Parvati seemed to enjoy the subject, talking in gossipy whispered tones, before calling over Trelawney every few minutes to double-check their readings.

"Here," Ron said, handing his empty cup to Regulus. Regulus downed his remaining tea and handed his over as well. Ron immediately looked into it. Regulus couldn't figure out why exactly, but Ron seemed to enjoy the repetitive practice of reading tea leaves over and over again.

Regulus tried to work through what he saw in Ron's cup, but he really felt like he was missing what was needed to master the topic. He had trouble picking out shapes, only seeing them every now and again. He looked up to see Ron focusing on the leaves with glazed, unblinking eyes.

"I see a rat," Ron said suddenly, his voice sounding hollow and distant. Hermione was looking at Ron through narrowed eyes like she thought he was play-acting. Harry just looked curious. "A rat," Ron repeated, his voice a little quieter. "And a dog. And the full moon."

Trelawney had wandered over and was watching Ron with a curious glint in her eye. Harry and Regulus made eye contact, both of them raising their eyebrows at each other. Hermione scoffed quietly and pulled out her Transfiguration textbook so she could read it under the table.

"What do you think it means?" Regulus prompted. Ron hadn't even spun his cup like he usually did.

“It’s not going to turn out how you think it will,” Ron said mysteriously.

“What won’t?” Harry asked.

“It could go either way though,” Ron said. “It all depends.”

“Depends on what?” Regulus couldn’t stop himself from asking. He couldn’t tell if Ron was playing this all up for Trelawney or not, but he still found himself reluctantly interested.

“Oh, please,” Hermione said, her voice irritated and sharp. It cut through Ron’s trance, and he dropped the cup as if it burned him. The sound of it smashing against the ground seemed to make everyone startle. Trelawney tried to ask Ron about what he was seeing, but by then the moment was over.

Lupin wasn’t in their Defense Against the Dark Arts class the next day. Harry and Regulus arrived late after Wood kept Harry in practice too long. Regulus of course stayed with him, still too worried to leave him on his own. Instead of Lupin teaching, Snape stood at the front of the classroom looking disdainfully as they entered.

“Sorry we’re late, Professor Lupin, we —” Harry said as they entered, cutting off when he made eye contact with Snape.

“Potter. *Black*,” Snape spat his name. “The lesson began ten minutes ago, so that will be ten points from Gryffindor for each of you. Sit down. Now.”

Regulus moved forward immediately, rolling his eyes at Snape. Harry didn’t move at all.

“Where is he?” Harry asked, his voice laced with a dawning suspicion.

“He is too ill to teach today,” Snape said. There was an unpleasant twist to his mouth as if he were holding in some terrible joke that none of them could understand.

“What’s wrong with him?” Harry’s eyes darkened as he spoke. He was looking at Snape like he was about to whip out his wand and challenge him to duel at a moment’s notice.

“Nothing life-threatening,” Snape said regretfully. He took five more points from Gryffindor for Harry’s failure to listen, and though Harry finally took his seat, Regulus could tell it took him great effort to do so without shouting.

The class topic was confusing, to say the least. Snape jumped over weeks’ worth of topics to cover Werewolves, something they weren’t meant to cover until the very end of the year. He lashed out at anyone who questioned this in a way that Regulus found unnerving. It was like he was watching the man have a breakdown right in front of him.

“You will each write an essay, to be handed in to me, on the way you recognize and kill werewolves,” Snape said as they began packing up their things to leave. That was when it finally clicked into place for Regulus.

“Why’s he got it in for Lupin?” Harry asked as they walked out of the classroom.

“Snape hates everyone,” Regulus answered. “I’ll see you guys later, okay?” He added quickly, throwing the words over his shoulder as he walked off.

“That’s odd,” Hermione said. “He hasn’t left your side all week.” Regulus just barely caught the words, but it didn’t matter. Harry, Hermione, and Ron were heading to lunch, there was hardly any danger, and for the moment, he needed to look something up, something he didn’t feel comfortable researching with the rest of them around.

He made his way to the library quickly, tucking himself away in the potions section. The potion Harry saw Snape bring to Lupin, that’s what he was looking for. He’d all but forgotten about it with everything that happened Halloween night, but now he felt almost sure of what it had to be.

He pulled out *Uncommon Potions* by Victoria Crenshaw, published only a few years prior, and flipped to the page he was looking for. “Wolfsbane Potion created by Damocles Belby.” Regulus scanned the page quickly. With its thick consistency and smoke that was supposed to billow off of a well-made batch, it fit perfectly with the description Harry had given.

Regulus was sure he already knew what was going on, but he needed one more detail, one more thing before he allowed himself to think it. He made his way to the Astronomy books, so quickly that he nearly tripped over two first years who were huddled together in one aisle. He never kept track of the moons himself, though when he was a child he and Sirius used to, always watching the moon through Sirius’s window. Now, he had no idea, but he pulled a book out that documented all the full moons from 1990 to 2020.

He flipped so quickly that he gave himself a paper cut on his forefinger and he found it. It was the day after the full moon. The full moon had been the night before. Lupin was a werewolf. And Snape knew. Did the rest of the staff know? Surely Dumbledore knew. Was he a werewolf while they were at Hogwarts? Did Sirius know? Did James? His thoughts were running a mile a minute. He shut the book and walked in a daze out of the library.

He had no idea what to do with this piece of information. Lupin was a werewolf, and he taught at Hogwarts. Regulus had never given much thought to werewolves. He knew that the Dark Lord worked with werewolves on occasion, though Regulus was never stupid enough to ask questions about it. His family always talked about werewolves with intense contempt, “half breeds” his mother would call them. Regulus would always nod along, though he never thought about it beyond that.

Now though, he wasn’t sure how to feel. Surely the students weren’t in danger. He doubted Dumbledore would allow a werewolf to teach at the school if the students could be killed by him. Although, their last Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor tried to destroy both Ron and Harry’s minds. The one before that tried to kill Harry and had the Dark Lord feeding on him like a leech.

Maybe the students were in danger, he didn’t know. He couldn’t parse out how he was supposed to deal with this information. He almost wanted to stomp right to Dumbledore’s office and demand to know what the old man was thinking, letting a creature like that in the school, but there was one thing that made him stop. Snape tried to out Lupin today, he tried to

get all of Lupin's students to understand what Lupin was. Why would Snape do that if not to hurt Lupin?

## Chapter End Notes

my friend and i started writing a peter pettigrew/barty crouch jr. fic. it's such a rare pair that there are only like 50 fics in the tag and only a handful of them have peter/barty as the main ship. anyways, if you want to read something unique that is also writing (partially) by me, then please check it out. im sure it will get very few hits lol

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/47542438/chapters/119817364>

# the quidditch game.

## Chapter Notes

listen, i tried to have an upload schedule, okay? but i have so much of this written already and i have no self control, so sometimes i just have to upload early.

also we just crossed 100k words?? that's absolutely insane.

The game against Hufflepuff was cursed from the start, Regulus thought. The storm that had been brewing all week was at its peak. The rain pattered heavily against the windows, keeping Regulus up most of the night, so by the time he got out of bed to head to breakfast, he could barely keep his eyes open.

Regulus cast several strong Impervius Charms on himself, Ron, Hermione, and Luna as they walked out to the pitch. However, despite the charms, he could already feel the rain soaking through his cloak. He walked down to where Gryffindor was getting ready to line up, so he could meet Harry.

“Hey,” he called out. Wood was in the middle of another lecture, trying to impart some last-minute wisdom on his team, but Regulus’s shout interrupted him. Harry had already mounted his broom, but looked over at Regulus and relaxed slightly out of his crouched position.

“What’s up?” Harry asked.

“Let me cast some warming charms on you,” Regulus said. The expensive Quidditch gear he’d purchased for Harry for his birthday already had built-in charms that kept rain from drenching whoever was wearing them. The goggles he wore would repel rain expertly, and the gloves would keep him from slipping, but still, Regulus wanted to make sure Harry would be comfortable.

Harry gave a nod. “Go ahead,” he said easily. Wood went back to his lecture, ignoring Regulus. Regulus had spent so much time with the team over the past week that Wood had taken to just disregarding his presence. Regulus cast a few charms that would keep Harry warm throughout the game. Harry shot him a grateful smile.

Regulus headed back up to where the rest of his friends were to watch the game, but it almost felt pointless. The rain was coming down so intensely that he could barely see a thing. It made his skin prickle with worry, imagining Harry flying around in a storm as bad as that one.

Regulus lost track of the game. He could barely follow what anyone was doing and he was distracted by the shivering children on either side of him. He cast several warming charms on

all of them, but they kept wearing off faster each time. He wished that Harry would just hurry up and catch the snitch, so they could go back inside.

That's when things started to go fuzzy. He was cold, and he could feel Luna and Hermione getting closer from where they stood on either side of him. They were all crowded together, huddling to stay warm, but there seemed to be an instinctive desire to stay close.

It was the sound of Sirius crying that made him focus on what was actually happening. Regulus was very familiar with the sound of Sirius's screams, the sounds of pain permeated throughout Grimmauld Place often during the school holidays, but his cries were far less common. Regulus wasn't even sure the last time he heard Sirius actually cry. He always worked so hard to keep his sounds to a minimum, not wanting to give their parents any kind of satisfaction.

"He's dead, he's dead, it's my fault," Sirius mumbled. Regulus felt sick to his stomach. What was this memory? Was Sirius talking about James? Regardless of his questions, he knew now that there was only one reason that he would be experiencing someone else's memories. The dementors must be close.

He pulled back from where he was leaning against the railing. "Stay together," Regulus shouted at Ron, Hermione, and Luna. They all look confused, but huddled closer together, filling the gap he just left. After that, he took off running.

He was trying to get to the professors' box, but it took him so long to get down from the stands that he could see the dementors swarming by the time he reached the ground. Sirius was sobbing again, but louder than before. It unsettled Regulus and he desperately wanted to lock the sound away.

The dementors flood onto the pitch like a dark wave, coming to crash on an unsuspecting village, and Regulus could only watch in horror as they all swarmed around Harry, who was already beginning to slip from his broom. Regulus had his wand out before he could even properly think, and he cast the strongest *immobulus* he could possibly manage. Harry barely made it a few feet below where he let go of the broom before he stopped in midair.

The students were screaming in terror by now, but Regulus ignored it. He ran out onto the pitch, ignoring everything else that was happening. He hoped that the others were doing okay, but he couldn't quite focus on it because the dementors had zeroed in their focus on Harry.

Why? Regulus couldn't help but think. Why are they so focused on Harry when they seemed barely interested in anyone else? Why Harry? He wished that he could cast a Patronus. He'd never been able to, which wasn't terribly uncommon for Death Eaters. He didn't think he knew anyone who could do it during his first life. He wondered if Sirius ever knew how to cast one.

Harry was moving slowly down to the ground, but he was fully unconscious. Regulus vaguely heard Dumbledore cast a Patronus, and he noticed a bright light in the corner of his eye, but he kept his magic focused on Harry, making sure that he would arrive safely to the ground.



After that it was chaos. People swarmed the grounds, Wood was shouting at Madam Hooch and the Hufflepuff Captain, and multiple professors and students ran to get a good look at Harry. Regulus conjured a stretcher, and the Weasley twins began pushing students aside to help him get Harry back to the castle. Despite the insanity, Regulus managed to make out one overly pale, drawn face. Draco, hovering a few feet away the entire walk up to the castle, was seemingly incapable of leaving Harry's side as he was carried off.

Regulus found out later that Cedric caught the snitch and that they'd chosen not to have a rematch, despite Cedric's insistence that Harry should get another chance. Regulus was also told about Harry's destroyed broom as if it should be Regulus's responsibility to break the news to Harry. Regulus couldn't help thinking about Ron's prediction, about staying away from the Whomping Willow.

Harry was unconscious for a long hour before he finally woke up. Draco remained nearby though, out in the hallway and out of sight of the rest of the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff teams. Regulus noticed Draco walking with fake casualness past the opened Hospital Wing doors for the fifth time in twenty minutes and decided to take pity on the boy.

"Harry's going to be fine," he said after following Draco out into the hall, so that no one else could see or hear them.

"What?" Draco said, a little too bewildered by Regulus's statement to show his usual animosity.

"He will be fine, the dementors just take a lot out of him, but he'll wake soon," Regulus said.

"I don't care," Draco said so quickly that Regulus could barely make out the individual words.

"Right," Regulus said slowly. He turned on his heels prepared to leave before Draco's voice stopped him.

"Did Black actually get into Gryffindor's common room?" Draco asked. Regulus turned to look at him and noticed Draco looked a little regretful as if he didn't intend to let the words out.

"No, he couldn't make it in without a password," Regulus said. "He wouldn't be able to make it to our dorm room regardless." Draco nodded a little bit, before crossing his arms tightly over his chest.

"And you didn't let him in?" Draco said suddenly, he looked at the ground, but his eyes were narrowed in a fierce glare. "You're not helping him?"

"I thought you didn't even believe I was related to him," Regulus replied, not quite able to keep the bitterness out of his voice. No one had outright accused him of helping Sirius, but he could feel their suspicion regardless, and it bothered him to no end.

"I don't," Draco yelled, before looking startled by his own volume. "I don't," he repeated in a quieter voice. "I know that you're not his son. But that doesn't mean you don't know him or

have some connection to him.” He waved one hand wildly in the air when he said the final few words.

“I’m not helping him,” Regulus said with a tired sigh. “I would never do anything to put Harry in danger, including helping Sirius Black.” Draco’s shoulders noticeably relaxed from their tense position once Regulus finished speaking.

“Fine,” Draco said through clenched teeth. “I believe you.” He spoke the words definitively as if he was the only one capable of passing judgment on the situation. He turned and stomped away before Regulus could even think of what to say in reply.

Regulus was heading back into the Hospital Wing when he overheard Cedric Diggory’s deep voice speaking. “You’re a great seeker. Really, you are. I wish we could play again,” Cedric said, his tone friendly and a little regretful.

“Oh, er, thanks,” Harry replied a little awkwardly. He must have just woken up while Regulus was out of the room. Regulus poked his head around the corner to see Harry propped up in bed, the others lingering a few steps away and pretending like they were not listening to him and Cedric speaking.

“Maybe we could play a pick-up game together another time. Seeker versus seeker,” Cedric added with a small smirk. Harry’s face, Regulus noticed, was so red that he looked like he was about to pass out from exertion, and at Cedric’s smirk, it grew impossibly redder.

Oh, Merlin, Regulus thought. He knew that look. Harry looked just like James did when James used to try and clumsily flirt with Lily Evans. Regulus did not feel prepared to deal with a thirteen-year-old Harry with a crush, especially a crush on Cedric Diggory. Cedric, for his part, seemed either completely oblivious to Harry’s feelings, too polite to acknowledge them, or, Regulus added regretfully, almost against his will, just as interested in Harry as Harry was in Cedric.

Cedric is too old for Harry, Regulus decided. He was a sixth year and much too tall. Harry was only thirteen, there was no reason for him to be dating a sixteen-year-old. Not to mention that there were already rumors around school about Cedric and his dating history. Regulus wondered if this was how parents felt watching their children develop a crush.

“Feeling any better?” Regulus interrupted them. Cedric gave him an odd look before nodding to Harry and leaving the Hospital Wing.

“Er, yeah, I’m okay,” Harry replied. He watched Cedric for a long moment before turning to look fully at Regulus. He still looked too pale and a little sickly, but he was at least awake and talking. “We lost the game,” Harry said when Regulus was quiet for too long.

“Yeah, I know,” Regulus said regretfully. “Are you all right?”

Harry shrugged but Regulus could see how upset he was. “And my broom,” he said, but his voice wobbled a little and he cut himself off, looking away swiftly.

“You can get another broom,” Regulus replied. “I’m sorry about this one though, I know it was your first one. But don’t worry, you can get a new one.”

The others were beginning to leave slowly, and soon it was just Harry and Regulus with Ron, Hermione, and Luna coming up to rejoin them. They were all still wearing soaked cloaks, and Regulus sent a quick Drying Charm at each of them.

“Thank you, Regulus,” Luna said cheerfully. “It was very wrong of the dementors to attack you, Harry. They do seem very interested in you, don’t they?”

“That’s a good point, Luna,” Hermione said, though her statement was ruined slightly by the obvious surprise in her voice. Luna did not seem insulted though, instead just giving Hermione a very pleasant smile. “Why are they so interested in him?”

“Yeah, maybe you have, like, more soul or something,” Ron said.

“More soul?” Hermione asked incredulously. “Your soul isn’t a measurable object, Ronald.”

“How do you know?” Ron asked, sitting heavily in the chair next to Harry’s bed. “I mean, maybe some people just have heavier souls or, like, a bunch of souls.” He chuckled slightly.

“You think the dementors are focused on Harry because he has more than one soul?” Hermione asked, throwing her hands up in the air like this conversation was ridiculous to even joke about. There was something about it though, something that made Regulus feel uncomfortable, like there was something he was missing.

“There’s something else,” Harry said uncomfortably.

“What?” Ron asked. Regulus conjured two more chairs for Hermione and Luna to sit in.

“I saw the Grim again,” Harry mumbled. Hermione rolled her eyes and scoffed.

“Where did you see the Grim?” Luna asked interestedly.

“In the stands,” Harry answered, he was looking down at his hands like he was ashamed to have seen the creature.

“You saw the Grim in the Quidditch stands?” Hermione clarified.

“What, just sitting with the rest of the students?” Ron asked.

“No, he was in one of the empty ones. But it was just a big black dog sitting in one of the stands,” Harry replied. “It threw me off, that’s why Cedric was able to catch the snitch.”

“I thought he was able to catch the snitch because you were attacked by dementors?” Hermione asked. Harry shrugged a little.

“I thought perhaps you let him win because you liked him,” Luna offered. All of them, except Regulus, looked at her with bewildered looks on their faces.

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The Weasley twins giving Harry a magical map of Hogwarts that showed him every possible route to get out of the school was the most stressful thing Regulus could imagine happening. Harry pulled him aside the morning of the last Hogsmeade visit before Christmas, his eyes glowing with mania.

“Regulus,” he hissed, waving Regulus over quickly. Regulus abandoned the book he was reading on the couch so that he could walk over to the small alcove Harry was standing in.

“What?” Regulus whispered back.

“Look,” Harry said before pulling out an old piece of parchment from his robe. “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” He placed his wand against the paper as he said the words, and Regulus watched in fascination as words began to appear.

“Messrs. Moon, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs,” Regulus read aloud as the words appeared. “Why do those names sound familiar?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said dismissively. “But look!” The map showed every single detail of Hogwarts. Harry pointed to where Harry Potter and Regulus Black floated in the Gryffindor Common Room. “And there’s more!”

“More than an entire map of the school that shows where everyone is?” Regulus asked doubtfully.

“Yeah, look,” Harry said and pointed to one of the secret passageways that lead out of the castle. “The twins said it led to the Honeydukes cellar. In Hogsmeade.”

Regulus had to take several deep breaths before he could respond to Harry. On one hand, he absolutely loathed the idea of Harry scampering off in a secret passage to an area where he would be largely unprotected from Sirius Black. But on the other hand, if Regulus did anything to keep Harry from using this insane and very unique magical item, Harry might never trust him again. He couldn’t risk that. Not to mention that Harry would undoubtedly find a way to Hogsmeade with or without Regulus, and Regulus would rather be there if he was going to do it.

“Okay, let’s go. Get your invisibility cloak,” Regulus whispered. Harry gave him such an intense smile that Regulus thought his face might break in two.

Hermione was appropriately scandalized to see them in Hogsmeade, so much so that Regulus vaguely worried if she was about to stomp up to the castle to tattletale on them. Ron seemed mostly bummed that the twins had never thought to tell Ron about the map, which Regulus thought was fair considering he was their actual brother. The twins were unpredictable though.

They ended up at the Three Broomsticks with Harry and Regulus crouched beneath the table and the invisibility cloak thrown over the top of them. Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, had inexplicably entered the bar along with McGonagall, Flitwick, and Hagrid. Rosmerta was regaling them with her memories of Sirius Black, the nice, if a little bit flirty, young man that he was. Regulus did his best not to gag.

“The worst he did isn’t even widely known,” Fudge replied, his voice scratchy like he desperately needed to clear it.

“The worst? Worse than murdering all those people, you mean?” Rosmerta replied. Regulus strained his ears to listen. He didn’t even realize his hand was shaking until Harry clamped his own around Regulus’s.

They were talking about James. Regulus thought he might be sick. James and Sirius, Potter and Black, the inseparable pair. “You’d have thought Black and Potter were brothers,” Flitwick said loudly. Regulus swayed slightly where he was crouched, Harry gave him a worried look. They talked about the Fidelius Charm that the Potters had, details that Regulus already knew. Hearing Hagrid recount converting Sirius made Regulus squeeze his eyes shut harshly.

The worst detail, the detail that stuck out like a sore thumb in the already terrible tale, was the detail that Sirius was Harry’s godfather. Regulus, of course, already knew this given that Harry was an heir to the Black estate, but Harry had never heard this detail. He gasped when he heard Hagrid mention it and glanced at Regulus with such intensity in his eyes that Regulus could barely look at him.

Harry and Regulus left through the Hogsmeade cellar shortly after they left the Three Broomsticks. Harry had barely spoken since Fudge had departed and Regulus felt just as disinclined to talk. Hermione and Ron just looked terribly worried, but Regulus couldn’t bring himself to comfort them.

“I asked Lupin to teach me the Patronus Charm,” Harry said, after they’d been walking in the tunnel for a few long, silent minutes.

“Did you?” Regulus asked, surprised.

“Yeah, I figure it would be good to know. You know, for Quidditch games and such, in case the dementors attack again,” Harry said quietly.

“That’s a really smart idea,” Regulus said.

“Thanks,” Harry replied, and Regulus could hear the slight smile in his voice, even through the dark tunnel. “You could come with, if you wanted. I’m sure Lupin would be okay with it.”

“Ah, that’s okay, Harry,” Regulus said quietly. “You should take advantage of the one-on-one instruction he’s offering.”

Harry was quiet for a long time, and Regulus thought he might not speak again. “Sirius Black is my godfather,” Harry mumbled suddenly. “That makes us like god-brothers or something, right?”

Regulus chuckled despite himself. “Yeah, I guess it kind of does.”

# the firebolt.

## Chapter Notes

a new chapter two days in a row? i did say i had no self control, didn't i? i just am so excited to get to sirius in this fic so i get impatient with uploading.

also happy pride month! to celebrate, i am writing a short, fluffy fic about wolfstar getting together if you all are interested :)

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/47608939/chapters/119992915>

Christmas was upon them before Regulus could even process it. Harry had been different since he found out that Sirius was his godfather. Regulus didn't quite understand it until he saw the way Harry spoke to Hagrid when they found out about Buckbeak's trial date. It was obvious then. Harry wasn't really upset that Sirius was his godfather, he'd been given enough bad news in his life to be able to take this bit in stride. No, he was upset that Hagrid had known and never told him.

That was the first time Regulus really thought about the fact that he was lying to Harry. It was for Harry's protection that he didn't know who Regulus really was. Or, at least, that's what Regulus thought. But after he watched the betrayal form in Harry's eyes as he looked at Hagrid, he knew that his own excuse wasn't going to cut it.

He hadn't even realized the guilt that had been brewing inside him when it came to his false identity. Not that he cared about lying to anyone else, he had no problems or lingering guilt when it came to that. But Harry was different. Harry was James's son. And more than that, he was Regulus's friend. He trusted Regulus and Regulus was lying to him. And not even for a very good reason.

Regulus was lying to him out of cowardice. He knew, once he really thought about it, that the reason he'd kept his identity a secret from Harry was that he wasn't prepared for Harry to look at him like James had when he'd discovered the Dark Mark on Regulus's arm. When Regulus told Harry who he really was, he would have to tell him the entire truth, including how he'd died and who he'd been in his past life.

All this was to say, that by the time the Christmas holidays were over, Regulus had decided that he would have to tell Harry, at least by the end of the year. However, he also decided that even his guilt couldn't make him tell Harry the *entire* truth. Yes, he would tell him he was Death Eater, and he would accept whatever judgment Harry saw fit to pass on him. But he would not ever tell Harry about his relationship with James.

Christmas morning dawned with a bright sunny sky. The grounds were covered in snow, but it looked soft and unthreatening. The dementors were most likely lingering farther out from the school now that it wasn't filled with happy students, so the skies had cleared for the time being. Regulus woke feeling warm and content.

"Oi! Presents!" Ron yelled, running around the dorm room and hitting Harry and Regulus in the face with pillows, one in each hand, as he laughed wildly. Harry chuckled sleepily, and Regulus let his face fall into an easy smile.

A small heap of parcels were at the foot of each of their beds. Regulus had gotten each of them a collection of chocolates he ordered from France, writing a note in each to say it was from his fake mother. He also purchased an expensive school bag for Hermione that would lighten her book load and make her days easier, some clothing for Harry (his go-to now), a collection of nice chess pieces for Ron, and a pair of elf-made earrings for Luna.

"Another sweater from Mum," Ron said glumly. "And it's maroon again."

"Want me to charm it another color?" Regulus asked. Ron looked elated for a moment before regretfully shaking his head.

"No, that's okay," he mumbled. "I don't want her to feel bad if she sees it." Harry gave Ron a kind, understanding smile. Ron was a good son.

"Hello, everyone." Luna's dreamy voice filled the room. "Regulus, can you let Hermione in?" Regulus vaguely wondered how Luna had managed to get into the common room at all. He hadn't told her the password, but she was a Ravenclaw, perhaps she figured out a way to get it.

"Oh, of course," Regulus said, jumping up from where he'd sat cross-legged on the ground. He still hadn't had the opportunity to add Hermione into the wards he made around their dorm room, so she was standing right outside the door looking awkward. "Sorry about that."

"What is happening? Why can't I get in?" Hermione asked. She was still wearing her dressing gown, her hair tied up in a bun on the top of her head, just a few loose strands poking out here and there.

"Er, yes, well," Regulus said. "I may have added some wards around the room after Sirius Black tried to break into Gryffindor Common Room. I didn't want to risk him getting to Harry while we were all asleep and I couldn't protect him."

Hermione's face visibly softened and she smiled. "That's an impressive piece of magic," Hermione said, not unkindly, though there was a small note of suspicion there.

"Yes, thank you," Regulus said politely, not making eye contact. He let her in the wards, and they entered the room to find Ron and Harry arguing about who had sent Harry a broom he was holding.

"I can't see Lupin affording something like this," Harry said uncertainly.

“What are you guys talking about?” Regulus asked.

“Did you give this to me?” Harry asked loudly. He looked excited and a little hopeful, like he was praying that Regulus’s answer would be yes.

Regulus inspected what he was holding. A Firebolt. The most expensive broom on the market. So pricey that you had to ask for the cost before you could even try to buy it. “No, I definitely would have put my name on it if I sent it to you,” Regulus said.

“Then who could it be?” Ron asked. “Oi! Don’t bring him in here!” Regulus hadn’t noticed Crookshanks bundled in the front of Hermione’s dressing gown. Hermione wasn’t listening to Ron though, she simply dropped the cat on Seamus’s bed while she stared gawking at the Firebolt.

“Who sent you that?” Hermione said incredulously.

“No idea, there isn’t a card or anything,” Harry said uncertainly, though his eyes were shining brightly, and he couldn’t quite seem to pull them from the broom.

“It’s the best broom there is,” Ron said excitedly.

“Yes, it’s supposed to use Tored Bunklewink Wings in the production of it,” Luna said, running one hand along the broom in awe. “That’s why it’s so fast.”

“What’s a Bored Wunklebink?” Ron asked, causing Harry to laugh loudly.

“But who’d send something that expensive and then not say they sent it?” Hermione asked. “Also those creatures do not exist, Luna. Surely you know that.”

“You don’t know everything, Hermione,” Luna said fiercely. Or at least, as fiercely as Luna could manage to say anything. Regulus chuckled a little.

“Maybe we should do some tests on it,” Regulus said, still looking at the room. “Just to make sure it’s safe. I mean, it could be from anyone. How did it even get through the wards?” He was mostly speaking aloud, but Hermione was looking at him with a very strained expression.

The rest of the morning was spent opening presents, only interrupted by Crookshanks trying once again to attack Scabbers. They went to Christmas lunch together and endured a very awkward interaction between Trelawney plus the rest of the staff before heading back up to the common room.

“Are you coming?” Regulus asked as Hermione split off from the group.

“I just want a quick word with McGonagall,” Hermione said evasively before walking off. Regulus shrugged and followed the others.

“Harry, bring your broom down, let me try a few detection spells on it,” Regulus instructed. Luna and Ron fell right into a game of chess, moving so quickly that it seemed like they had already been discussing moves before they arrived at the board.



“You know, you sound very good at Tasseography,” Luna said.

“Oh,” Ron said, his cheeks growing faintly pink. “Thanks, Luna. I don’t know if that’s true though. Sometimes I wonder if Hermione is right and I’m just making it all up.”

“Do you think you could read my tea leaves today?” Luna asked, instead of acknowledging Ron’s self-deprecation. It was sweet, Regulus thought, the way she encouraged him. Regulus wasn’t sure that he really understood Divination, he doubted he had much of a talent for it, but Ron seemed to at least be trying and succeeding enough to get Trelawney’s attention, so he wasn’t about to question it.

“Okay, sure,” Ron said with a smile. “After our game?” Luna smiled widely and nodded.

“These spells aren’t going to damage the broom, are they?” Harry asked as he sauntered down the stairs, broom in hand.

“Doubt it,” Regulus replied. “If they do, we can always contact the manufacturer. They shouldn’t damage them and if they do, then something is messed up with the broom.”

Harry still seemed a little uncertain, but he handed over the broom regardless. There was that trust again. Regulus felt his uncomfortable guilt swirling around inside him. Regulus had barely pulled out his wand when McGonagall came in through the portrait hole looking stern and regal, though her cheeks were still a little red from the wine she’d had during Christmas lunch.

“That’s it, is it?” McGonagall asked, nodding to the broom in Regulus’s hand. Ron and Luna had stopped playing and were watching with rapt attention. “And there was no note at all, Potter?”

“No,” Harry said, his face was suspiciously blank

“I see, well, I’m afraid I will have to confiscate this, Potter,” she said, like Harry had been specifically breaking the rules, like it was a punishment.

“What? Why?” Harry asked, his voice rising.

It turned out that Hermione had gone to tell McGonagall about the broom, expressing worry that it was from Sirius Black himself. McGonagall took the broom to strip it down to search for any curses or spells that could cause Harry danger. Regulus wasn’t totally opposed to an experienced professor looking over the broom, but he knew that this did not bode well for Hermione.

“What did you go running to McGonagall for?” Ron yelled the moment McGonagall was gone.

“Because I thought it might be from Sirius Black,” she said, her face red and blotchy like she had already been crying. Ron and Harry immediately started yelling. Luna put her hands over her ears and watched them warily. Hermione angrily stomped away, but Regulus followed

her. He felt bad for the girl, but he also needed to know why she thought Sirius might have sent it.

“You have to agree with me, don’t you?” She demanded once they were away from the others. “You’re more concerned about Harry’s well-being than anyone. It’s like you’re his parent or something.”

“Hermione, calm down. Why did you think Sirius Black sent this?” Regulus asked calmly.

“Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it? He would have the money, I looked it up, Gringotts operates outside of the Ministry, and he might know how much Harry loves Quidditch and that he might not question a gift like this.”

“That does make sense,” Regulus said evenly. It really did, he hadn’t thought of it and felt a little dumb for it. But at the same time, it wasn’t exactly Sirius’s style. At least, the Sirius he used to know. Or really, the Sirius who would just try and barge into a castle full of children and then destroy a portrait when he didn’t think his plan out enough and got stuck. That didn’t seem like the kind of man who could come up with such an elaborate idea.

“So you’ll tell them that,” Hermione implored.

“I’ll try,” Regulus said uncertainly. Ron was already on edge with the cavalier way Hermione treated his pet, plus Hermione’s method wasn’t the best way to go about it, he thought. “Why didn’t you tell me about this? About your theory?”

“Well, you were already talking about casting your own spells,” Hermione explained, though she suddenly looked uncertain. “And I just thought that it was better if a professor knew, is all,” she said the last bunch of words all at once making them difficult to understand.

“You know,” Regulus said, feeling annoyed despite himself. “Harry is a very empathetic and caring person, especially about his friends. If you had told him all of this and then said ‘Yes, Harry, let your best friend Ron fly on a possibly cursed broom’ he would have gone to McGonagall with you.”

“I didn’t think about that,” Hermione said uncomfortably. “I just —”

“I understand that your heart was in the right place, but I think you should understand it from their point of view. Now it feels like they can’t trust you without you immediately going to a professor to tell on them,” Regulus explained. “It probably feels like a betrayal. Like you didn’t even trust Harry enough to get his opinion.”

Hermione looked like she was on the verge of tears. “I didn’t mean it like that,” Hermione said.

“I know that, and I think they would understand if you explained it. Maybe just give them an hour or so to cool off, then we can talk about it, okay?” Regulus said. When did he become such a moderator for fights between children? Hermione nodded and, to Regulus’s surprise, hugged him before scampering up to her room.

Regulus spent the next few hours talking Harry and Ron down from their anger. Luna helped significantly in that way that only Luna could manage. Cutting right down to the issue and understanding exactly how others would feel. She used empathy like a superpower, Regulus thought. Hermione came down later and explained how she felt and apologized. By the time the sun had set, they were all friends again.

Harry was still sulky about the broom as they were getting ready for bed, though Regulus could tell he was trying to hide it. “Hey, I need to talk to you,” Regulus said quietly. Ron was in the bathroom so they had a moment alone.

“What’s up?” Harry asked curiously.

“After Ron goes to sleep, I need you to take me down to the Chamber of Secrets,” Regulus whispered.

“What?” Harry shouted.

“Shh!” Regulus hushed him, and Harry looked mildly guilty.

“Why?” Harry whispered.

“I need to get the basilisk fangs,” Regulus answered. “Please don’t ask me why.” He was a little afraid that Harry was going to try and argue, but he finally shrugged and nodded his head. It took only a few minutes before Ron was snoring, and Harry and Regulus quietly tiptoed down to the common room.

Harry had the invisibility cloak in one hand and the marauder’s map in the other. “I doubt anyone will be out in the corridors tonight, there are only a few of us still at school,” Regulus said. Not to mention that most of the professors were no doubt in a drunken slumber by now, Regulus thought, though didn’t say it out loud.

“True,” Harry conceded. “But just in case.” Regulus nodded and the two of them crouched under the cloak to walk slowly to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Regulus thought it was going to be involved, but it only took about an hour to get down there and back. He’d brought dragon hide gloves and a dragon hide pouch to extract and store the teeth. The basilisk had decomposed quickly and was basically just a skeleton by that point, so the teeth were easy to pull out.

“Are you going to tell me what they’re for one day?” Harry asked as they walked back to the dorm. He didn’t even bother to whisper, the corridors were so empty.

Regulus chuckled. “Yeah, one day I will. But for now, you definitely don’t want to know.”

That night Ron and Luna headed off right after breakfast to the Astronomy Tower to read their tea leaves. They hadn’t gotten to do it the day before with all the Firebolt-related drama. Hermione left to go to the library, still feeling a little raw from all the shouting and hoping to get caught up on all her schoolwork that she had due in February. Regulus hadn’t planned to leave the grounds yet, but since it was just Harry and himself, he knew he had to take the opportunity.

Harry was extremely curious about why Regulus needed Harry to get his invisibility cloak and meet him at the passageway behind the statue of the one-eyed witch.

“Now, listen to me,” Regulus whispered fiercely as they walked quickly down the tunnel. “We are going to go to Hogsmeade, call the Knight Bus, and go to Diagon Alley.”

“What? Why?” Harry asked. “Is this about the broom?”

“No, Harry, forget about the broom for a second,” Regulus said. “I need you to focus.”

“Okay, but what exactly am I focusing on?” Harry asked, throwing his hands out in confusion.

“I think there is something in the Potter family vault that we can use to make a protective amulet for you to wear,” Regulus explained.

“What the — Regulus, what are you even talking about? What Potter vault? There are just Galleons in there,” Harry said in an exasperated voice.

“No, Harry, that’s just your personal vault,” Regulus said quickly. “Probably just the ones your parents set up for you to have spending money.”

“What? That’s spending money?” Harry mumbled. “What does that mean?”

“Oh Merlin, listen, okay?” Regulus said, his anxiety buzzing under his skin like a drug, making him feel like he was going to vibrate right out of his body. “All you need to do is ask them to enter the Potter vault when we get there. What I need you to focus on is staying safe. No matter what, keep the invisibility cloak on! Only take it off when I tell you to. And if we run into Sirius Black, then you run. Understand?”

“You think we’re going to run into Sirius Black?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know, do I?” Regulus shouted, then consciously lowered his voice. “Sorry. I’m just stressed. Listen, I doubt we will, but you never know, and I swear to Merlin, I will not let him hurt you.”

“I’m not just going to leave you,” Harry argued.

“Yes, you are. He’s not going to hurt me,” Regulus lied. He had no idea how Sirius would react to him. “Plus, I can take care of myself. If we make it out unscathed then we can go and get a new broom. Not a Firebolt,” he added when Harry opened his mouth to say something. Harry pouted slightly but nodded. “Great, now let’s go.”

They made it out of the Honeydukes cellar easily. It was so empty with all the students at home that Ambrosius Flume was asleep behind the counter. He startled awake at the sound of the bell ringing above the door, but they were long gone by then, running down the cobblestone pathway outside. Regulus stepped out from beneath the invisibility cloak and stuck his wand out.

“Where are you headed?” A man asked as Regulus and an invisible Harry boarded the bus.

“Diagon Alley. As close to Gringotts as you can get us,” Regulus instructed primly. The man nodded before looking at Regulus with an odd glint in his eye.

“You look familiar, what did you say your name was?” The man asked.

“It’s Ron Granger, sir,” Regulus responded. Harry snickered next to him, and Regulus barely kept himself from elbowing the empty space.

“Right, right,” the man mumbled. They made it to Gringotts without any trouble, and Regulus breathed a sigh of relief the moment they were in the lobby. Harry stayed so close to Regulus that Regulus could feel his hand bumping against him every couple of steps.

“I need to talk to someone about the Potter vault,” Regulus said to the first goblin he came across. “In private,” he added. The goblin looked at him with a curious look on his face.

“Right this way,” he said, leading them back to a windowless room with gold walls. Regulus took several deep breaths, only then aware that he had been holding his breath in anticipation.

“Can I take this off yet?” Harry asked.

“No,” Regulus asked, taking a seat heavily in one of the chairs. Harry stayed standing, and Regulus could hear him kicking his feet around.

“Hello sirs,” a goblin said as he entered. It was the same one Regulus had spoken to the last time he’d been in the bank. “What can I do for you?”

“Okay, take it off,” Regulus instructed. Harry shucked the invisibility cloak off his shoulders and gave an uncomfortable smile to the goblin. “We need to get into the Potter family vault.”

“I see,” the goblin said, steepling his fingers together as he took a seat across the desk from Regulus. “Do you have your key?” He directed the question at Harry, but he kept eye contact with Regulus.

“Er,” Harry answered before looking down at his sweatshirt like a key he’d never seen in his life might just appear in front of him.

“No worry,” the goblin said. “We can do a blood test. It will take no time at all.” Regulus knew that was a lie. It was nearly an hour by the time they were able to make it all the way down to the vaults, and by that point, he was crabby and irritated. Harry wasn’t much better off. He seemed to be feeding off of Regulus’s energy and was getting nervous.

“So, what are we looking for exactly?” Harry asked in a clipped voice.

“I don’t know exactly,” Regulus answered. “It should be a dark piece of metal or a crystal, something that is or could be turned into jewelry.”

“Right,” Harry answered irritably and started looking around. They looked for only about ten minutes before Regulus grew uneasy.

“Look, I’m sorry for dragging you out here,” he said suddenly. “But I know your family should have this item.” He realized immediately after the words were out of his mouth that they sounded suspicious. There was no way he should know what the Potters had in their family vault. “Every wizarding family has one,” he lied. “I just want you to have something to protect you when a professor or I aren’t around ” he added.

Harry softened. “I know, Reg. It’s fine. Let’s just find it.” The search went much easier after that. It was still an exorbitantly long time to find what they were looking for, but they eventually did. Or Harry did, to be more exact. It was a flat black rock that had gold thread laced around it and braided into an extravagant necklace. It looked almost like it was glowing.

“Put it on, we’ll figure it out later. We need to get back,” Regulus said. They were almost out the door of Gringotts before Regulus remembered something. “Put your invisibility cloak on and wait right here for me, okay? I’ll be right back.”

“Sure,” Harry replied, and Regulus wondered if he was thinking about the broom shop already.

“The Black vaults,” Regulus said to the goblin that had been helping them. “Has anyone accessed them recently?”

The goblin looked at him for a long moment before an unfortunate smile grew across his face. “Oh, yes, Mr. Black. Only once though. Paid order to a Mr. Randolph Spudmore.” Regulus felt the floor drop out below him. Spudmore was the producer of the Firebolt. Sirius had used the Black vaults to buy Harry a Firebolt. Was it cursed? Why did he do that?

“Thank you,” Regulus said lightly, his head felt like it was spinning. Even as he and Harry went out to buy a new broom, not a Firebolt thank you very much. They made it back to Hogwarts with only Ron, Hermione, and Luna wondering where they had been, he did not feel any more stable. Even with Harry safely asleep in the dorm next to him, he could not shake the feeling that Sirius was watching him.

## the werewolf defense.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Regulus didn't get a chance to test out the necklace until a few days after they got it. He took it into an unused classroom, the school was still thankfully empty because of the winter holidays, and decided to practice hitting it with a few spells. It was difficult to tell if they were being reflected or if the lack of a human body was causing the spells to dissipate before they could cause real damage, so he had to move on to his next plan of attack.

Harry was very unsettled with the prospect of hitting Regulus with dueling spells while Regulus wore the necklace, but Regulus wasn't going to risk hurting Harry. This plan ended up being futile and painful though as it turned out the necklace was useless to anyone without Potter blood. The intricate colors faded to a dull gray the moment that Harry took it off and reignited the moment he grabbed it again.

"It's fine, Reg, just do one that's not going to hurt," Harry said easily.

"I'm not sure that will be enough," Regulus said, gnawing on his bottom lip in concentration. "*Rictusempra* ." The harmless Tickling Charm went right through whatever possible shield the necklace could offer and hit Harry squarely in the chest. He giggled helplessly. "*Finite* ."

"Okay, well try something that will hurt a bit," Harry said. "I'm going to be fine. You don't need to worry so much." Regulus wasn't inclined to agree, but he needed to test the necklace. He shot a quick Stinging Hex out and watched in awe as it seemed to veer off course at the last second and miss Harry completely. "Cool," Harry said. They tried a few more tests, but it seemed that the necklace, at least for now, would be enough to protect him.

January arrived with a very awkward interaction between himself and Hermione.

"I need to ask you something," she whispered, pulling on his sleeve so that he would follow her into a small alcove.

"What?" Regulus asked. She looked worried as if she might get in trouble for saying what she was about to say.

"It's about Professor Lupin," Hermione said slowly. Regulus nodded for her to go on. "About why he missed class."

"Ah," Regulus said. He tried to keep his voice level, but something must have given him away.

Hermione gasped and pointed at him accusingly. "You already know, don't you?" Regulus cringed slightly but eventually nodded. "When did you figure it out?" She was looking very suspicious again, as she always did when Regulus slipped up.

"I figured it out after Snape was *kind* enough to mention it in class," Regulus said truthfully, his voice twinging on Snape's name. He still wasn't sure how to feel about Lupin and his lycanthropy, but he wasn't keen on siding with Snape either way.

"It's not his fault, you know," Hermione said, as if she were reading his thoughts. "Werewolves are terribly discriminated against, I looked it up." With that simple phrase, she was off. Jumping into a lecture that lasted a full half-hour about the terrible lives that werewolves lived.

January also meant Harry beginning his Patronus lessons with Lupin. Harry crashed into the dorm room one night saying, "Lupin knew our dads!"

"Sorry?" Ron mumbled. He was dozing on his bed and had shot up when Harry entered the room.

"Not you, Ron," Harry said quickly before turning to Regulus. "He knew my dad and Sirius. He said he was friends with my dad, with James!"

It wasn't something Regulus thought Lupin would bring up, but now that he had, something simmered up in Regulus that he hadn't realized was right below the surface since he first saw Lupin on the Hogwarts Express. He waited till he saw Lupin at dinner one night to sneak up to his office and wait for him.

"Oh! Mr. Black, what are you doing here? It's almost curfew," Lupin said, his voice laced with uneasiness as he stepped into the room. Regulus was leaning up against Lupin's desk waiting for him, trying to make his body look relaxed and confident, despite the anxiety that was bubbling inside of him.

"I heard that you knew James Potter," Regulus said vaguely. "You told Harry that you knew him."

"Oh, well," Lupin said, before stopping to clear his throat awkwardly. "Yes, I went to school with him."

"You were friends with him, you mean," Regulus corrected. "You told Harry that you were friends with him at Hogwarts."

Lupin gave him a long, unsteady look. "Yes, I was," Lupin said finally. Regulus nodded and looked away, taking a moment to fortify himself. He knew this was risky, that Lupin might figure out who Regulus was the moment Regulus started speaking, but he had to chance it. He had styled his overgrown hair, so it hung looser around his face, more reminiscent of his brother back in Hogwarts, than how Regulus used to wear it.

"Then why, Lupin," Regulus spat his name, looking back at the unkempt man, "does Harry not know who you are?"

"He knows who I am," Lupin defended, though his voice was soft.



“Don’t play games with me,” Regulus said, pushing off the table so that he was standing up straight. He wished that he was taller, though even when he was fully grown, Lupin still would have towered over him. Still, his small thirteen-year-old frame was definitely putting him at a disadvantage.

“What do you mean?” Lupin asked with a sigh, like this conversation was a waste of time for him. It made Regulus furious and he ground his teeth together before speaking.

“Harry doesn’t have a single adult in his life that cares about him,” Regulus said the words quietly, but even he could hear the madness dancing behind them. “He has spent his entire life thinking that everyone connected to his parents was dead and yet here you are, completely capable and alive. Where have you been?”

Lupin was looking at him like Regulus had grown a second head. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that Harry has grown up neglected and disregarded. He didn’t even know he was a wizard until his eleventh birthday. He needed someone in his life that cared and, considering that you were James’s *friend*,” he said the word like it injured him, “that person should have been you.”

“I — I wasn’t in a place where I could take care of Harry. I’m a — The Ministry would not have allowed me to adopt him. Besides, he did not need someone like me in his life,” Lupin replied, speaking like their roles had reversed, and Regulus was now his teacher, admonishing him for his bad grades.

Regulus could tell what topic Lupin was dancing around, what words he was leaving out. Lupin was a werewolf and he probably spent the last decade jumping from job to job, living a poor man’s life. At least, if Hermione was to be believed, and in most cases she was. That was what he meant by Harry not needing ‘someone like him.’ Regulus felt unsympathetic.

“This might be news, Lupin.” Regulus couldn’t stop saying his name, his anger so intense that he wanted to run across the room and pummel the professor. “But not everything is about you!” He shouted the last words, and Lupin looked like he’d been struck.

“Who are you?” Lupin asked after a long moment of tense silence. Regulus threw his hands up in frustration. He didn’t care anymore if Lupin figured it out, he couldn’t stand to look at the selfish man even a moment longer. He stomped out of the room, brushing past Lupin in a rage. Lupin didn’t stop him, letting him go like he was glad to see Regulus leave.

In February, when Harry was on the way back from another meeting with Lupin, McGonagall returned the Firebolt, saying that they could find no charms or magic placed on it. Regulus wasn’t sure what to do. He knew that Sirius was the one to purchase it, but if none of the professors could find anything wrong with it, then he couldn’t find a reason that Sirius would have gone to the trouble.

How did Sirius even know that Harry had destroyed his last broom? He had to still be in the area, but where could he be hiding? He wondered if he should tell someone about his discovery at Gringotts, but to what end? He didn’t want the Ministry involving itself in the

Black vaults, not that they would have the legal ability to do so. Harry was over the moon that the Firebolt had been returned and Regulus felt at his wit's end trying to deal with everything, on top of worrying about what would happen when Harry finally rode it. It felt like too much and he'd already felt like he was jerking Harry around so much recently, taking him to the Chamber of Secrets and to Gringotts without fully explaining what he was doing.

In the end, he decided to not tell anyone. Perhaps it was a mistake, but for now, he decided to wait and see. If Sirius was keeping tabs on them, then he didn't want to reveal too much. Everything else seemed to be easygoing, but it all went downhill when Ron came down from the dorm yelling about Scabbers' murder. The missing rat, coupled with the blood stain on Ron's sheets, was pretty damning. Regulus watched as Ron and Hermione's friendship crumbled under the weight of the dead pet.

Harry, Regulus, and Luna did their best to stay out of it, though Hermione wasn't too fond of Luna to begin with, so Hermione basically picked a side for her. Not to mention that Luna had begun spending more alone time with Ron, both of them leaving the group to go experiment with tea leaves and crystal balls in the Divination Tower. Harry and Regulus did their best to spend time with Hermione in the meantime, but she was so overwhelmed with schoolwork that she eventually started avoiding them too.

The game against Ravenclaw came up quickly. Regulus and Ron walked with Harry down to the pitch early in the morning and were just about to wave him off when Cedric came sauntering down the pathway from the castle.

"Hey, Harry!" Cedric yelled. Harry turned to look at him, a light dusting of pink spreading across his cheeks.

"See you later, mate," Ron said with a wave, turning to walk back to the castle. Regulus turned to walk with him, though not before shooting a glare at the sixth year. Cedric looked mildly confused, before turning his attention back on Harry.

"I just wanted to wish you good luck," Regulus heard Cedric say, as he and Ron walked away. Regulus did not like Cedric.

The game was quick and the Firebolt gave Harry no trouble, not that Regulus relaxed for even a single moment. He almost threw up when he saw what looked like several dementors hanging out near one of the stands, but in the end, it was just Draco and his friends playing a prank. Harry cast an impressive Patronus at them regardless and caught the snitch only a moment later.

"The dementors didn't affect me at all!" Harry yelled excitedly. Regulus was walking slowly down to the pitch with everyone else when he overheard Harry talking to Lupin.

"That's because they weren't dementors," Lupin said with a laugh, though the noise choked off when he made eye contact with Regulus. Regulus couldn't understand the look on Lupin's face, he seemed unsettled and suspicious, but also pained in a way that Regulus couldn't make sense of. "Come and see," he said, turning his attention back on Harry who was beaming up at him.

There was a raucous party in the Gryffindor common room that night. Regulus did his best to enjoy himself, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. He tried to pull Hermione away from her books for the night, but she shook him off and practically sprinted back up to her dorm to work on schoolwork. It wasn't until late that night that something pulling at Regulus's magic woke him.

"What?" he whispered to no one in particular. It felt like someone was trying to enter their dorm. He cast a quick *tempus*, it was nearly two in the morning. Who would be trying to enter the room at this time that wasn't already keyed into the wards? He was climbing out of bed when the screaming started.

He jumped to his feet, or tried to at least, his ankles tangled in his bedsheets as he tried to stand, and he fell heavily to the ground.

"W'as goin' on?" Harry said sleepily. "Who's screaming?" He sounded much more coherent when he said the second question.

"Stay there," Regulus whispered furiously. He grasped his wand tightly, before swinging the door open. It was a second-year Gryffindor, Regulus wasn't sure of his name, and he was still standing outside the dorm door, screaming at the top of his lungs. "What's happening?" Regulus said loudly.

"Black! It was Sirius Black! He was trying to get into the dorm! He had a knife!" the child yelled. By this point, several older students had come running down the stairs. Harry swung the door of the dorm open. "He ran when he saw me! But he was here!" The child pointed down the stairs, indicating the direction where Sirius had run.

Regulus felt like his head had detached from his body. He was on the move before he could even think about it. He started down the stairs, tripping over his feet but still managing to catch himself before he fell. He rushed out the portrait door and out into the corridor. He didn't know where he was headed exactly, but he kept his eyes peeled. Where could Sirius have gone?

It wasn't until Regulus reached the front door that he was stopped.

"Where do you think you're going?" Lupin's voice cut right through Regulus's hysteria.

"Did you let him in?" Regulus practically growled when he turned to see the professor standing behind him. He brandished his wand out in front of him like he was holding a knife.

"What?" Lupin asked, alarmed.

"Sirius. Did you let him into the castle? I didn't think you would do it, but maybe I was wrong," Regulus said, the words slipping from his lips like fire.

"Of course, I did not let Sirius Black into the castle," Lupin hissed angrily.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" Regulus said as he took a step toward Lupin. Lupin looked down at him like he was watching a rabid animal.

“I would never put the students in this castle at risk like that,” Lupin said, speaking quietly and calmly. Regulus gave him a long look, he couldn’t decide if he believed him or not. “Why would you think I would help him?” Lupin asked softly.

“I overheard Snape,” Regulus offered, mostly because it was an easy excuse.

“Ah,” Lupin said and, to Regulus’s surprise, rolled his eyes. His body language instantly relaxed like he was prepared for this specific argument, like he’d heard it a thousand times already. “I see. Well, Snape has an—”

“And I know you’re in love with him,” Regulus said just to interrupt him. Lupin was looking far too relaxed at that moment, and Regulus wanted so badly to unsettle him. His words got the job done, that was clear immediately from the way Lupin’s face shifted through a hundred different emotions seemingly all at once.

“How do you—”

“I saw the face you made when you realized who I was,” Regulus said. His teeth ached from the way he’d been clenching them together. His body was so tense that he knew his muscles would be sore the next day. “How could you still feel that way after what he’s done?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lupin said, though Regulus could see from his eyes that he’d hit a nerve.

“Mr. Black!” A voice cut through the tense conversation Lupin and Regulus were having. “What is going on here?”

Regulus realized that it must look very alarming to an outside observer, the way he was holding Remus at wand point while he interrogated him. McGonagall was shuffling down the stairs toward them. She was wearing her sleep clothes and looked unusually ruffled. Regulus wondered who had gone to wake her up. Regulus and Lupin looked back at one another but neither of them answered McGonagall.

“Mr. Black, is there a reason I am unable to enter your dorm room?” McGonagall asked sternly when she finally arrived in front of him.

“Er, right, well,” Regulus said, stumbling ungracefully over his words.

“It is against the rules to ward any room in Hogwarts,” McGonagall said. “You should not have been able to do it at all in the dorm rooms.”

“I didn’t want Sirius Black to be able to get to Harry,” Regulus replied, trying to infuse his voice with confidence.

It turned out that even if you had good intentions, warding a dorm room was still something that warranted several weeks’ worth of detention. Although, it was probably made worse by the fact that Regulus refused to remove it, and it had to be taken down by Dumbledore himself. The castle was searched again that night, but Sirius was long gone by the time that

happened. Regulus made Harry wear the necklace constantly after that, which Harry grumbled about.

Harry and Regulus stayed up trying to look at the map, but they couldn't spot him anywhere. Regulus did note that Lupin spent most of the night alone in his office, rather than helping the other teachers. Harry wondered if they should tell someone about the passageways into the castle, but Regulus figured that Dumbledore already knew. Besides, he wasn't sure how much faith he had in the professors, given that Sirius had broken in twice without detection.

Neville ended up getting banned from Hogsmeade for his mistake of writing down the passwords since that was how Sirius managed to enter the castle. Regulus felt that was a bit harsh. If anything, he thought that the professors should have been taking more responsibility for their lack of protection around the school so that Sirius couldn't just waltz in. The Howler Neville received from his grandmother a few days later made Regulus feel even more sympathetic. It was hardly Neville's fault.

Regulus having Saturday detention meant that he wasn't able to sneak into Hogsmeade with Harry. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to go on your own," Regulus told him. "I know we went before, but really if Sirius saw you and decided to attack, then he might hurt Ron and Hermione as well as you."

Harry looked serious and solemn as he agreed. Regulus should have known better than to trust him. He was still a teenager, after all. By the time he made it back to the dorm room, just before dinner, it looked like everyone had their crups kicked. "What happened?" Regulus asked, and then regretted it immediately.

It turned out they were all looking so sad because Hagrid lost his case defending Buckbeak, and now the Hippogriff was going to be executed. That wasn't all though. Harry had gone to Hogsmeade, choosing to disregard what Regulus had said, and had been spotted by Draco. All of this culminated in him getting the Marauder's map confiscated.

"I cannot believe that you went behind my back and snuck into Hogsmeade anyways," Regulus all but yelled. Harry looked horribly guilty, but Regulus was so furious that he barely cared. "Sirius could have killed you. We know that he's out there." He gestured in the general direction of the Forbidden Forest. "What if he was just waiting to get you out of the castle? What if you were killed? What if Ron and Hermione were killed?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I know it was stupid."

"Yes, it was stupid. We could have gone to Hogsmeade any other time, plus you've been there before. It's not like this was necessary. Not to mention that Neville and Luna were stuck in the castle too, and you could have spent time with them." Regulus didn't really know what he was yelling about now, he just needed to yell.

Harry looked vaguely on the verge of tears.

"And now you've lost the map," Regulus said. "To Lupin of all people."

“What’s wrong with Lupin?” Harry asked curiously, but Regulus shot him a glare so venomous that he instantly stopped speaking.

It wasn’t until several days later that Harry confessed something else that he’d been keeping to himself. Apparently, one night when he couldn’t sleep, Harry noticed the name Peter Pettigrew walking around the castle. Peter Pettigrew, the supposed dead man who Sirius had killed. Like everything else, Regulus had no idea what to do with this information. He barely remembered Peter from his time in school. “Lupin said it was impossible,” Harry mumbled. “But I’m sure I saw him.”

## Chapter End Notes

omg reggie, that was crazy. why did you say all that? lmfao

## **the rat tail.**

In March, they celebrated Ron's birthday with a small party in their dorm room. Ron opened each of their gifts with a happy smile. Regulus was most surprised by Luna's gift, a hand-painted set of tarot cards that she made herself. "Wow, Luna, thank you!" Ron shouted. Regulus found their friendship very endearing, if a little confusing.

Regulus spent most of his time in detention during the month, but he finally finished halfway through March. This meant he had to hear about Hermione slapping Draco in the face secondhand, but he found himself laughing helplessly regardless. Hermione also stormed out of Divination one day when Trelawney made yet another comment about Hermione's lack of prowess in the subject.

"Some day Hermione's having, eh?" Ron muttered after Trelawney moved over to join Parvati and Lavender's table.

"Yeah," Harry said, glancing at the crystal ball, looking unsettled. "Do you think she really saw the Grim again?"

"Maybe," Ron said shrugging. "She's really playing it up though, isn't she?"

"You can say that again," Regulus said, equally annoyed with Trelawney's antics.

"What do you see?" Harry asked Ron. He looked genuinely interested for a moment before saying, "Can you see if we're going to win the Quidditch cup?"

Ron chuckled before looking seriously into the crystal ball as if he might be able to see the answer.

The strangest thing that happened in March was when Regulus, along with Ron and Harry, went to spend time with Luna, only to discover that every single copy of the Monster Book of Monsters was trailing after her like she was a mother hen.

"Er, Luna?" Ron said uncertainly. "What's going on?"

"Hm?" Luna responded distractedly.

"Why do you have all these books?" Harry asked. He and Ron exchanged bewildered looks.

"I don't have them," Luna corrected. "They are just following me."

"And why are they following you?" Regulus said with a laugh.

"I don't think they like being read very much," Luna said with an unhappy frown. "I told them they could stay as long as they behaved." The books circled around her whenever she stopped walking, a few of them snapping, though they looked almost playful, the others looked like well-behaved pets, waiting patiently for a treat.

“Where have you been keeping them?” Harry asked. He was laughing a bit, though Regulus didn’t miss how impressed he looked. Regulus was inclined to agree with the feeling given how Luna had apparently tamed the wild books.

“They usually sleep under my bed,” Luna said. Ron tried to walk up to one of the books, and it snapped unhappily at him. “Be nice, okay?” Luna said gently. The book turned toward her and calmed down.

“And your dormmates are okay with that?” Ron asked curiously.

“Oh, I don’t think they mind,” Luna said happily. “They have actually stopped playing the game where they hide my belongings.”

“They were doing what?” Harry asked incredulously. Luna nodded solemnly.

“Yes, it wasn’t very fun, so I’m glad that they have stopped doing it,” Luna replied.

“I’m sure having a pack of Monster books protecting your bed has helped,” Ron said with a laugh, though he exchanged a bewildered look with Harry immediately after. Luna just agreed.

The Quidditch game against Slytherin came up quickly after the Easter holiday break. Oliver Wood, the Gryffindor captain, was unbearable in the way he constantly badgered Harry over and over again, telling him that he wasn’t allowed to catch the snitch unless Gryffindor was leading by at least fifty points. Harry was constantly repeating, “I know, I know!” every time Oliver spoke.

Harry sat with them at breakfast the morning of the game, looking relaxed despite the dark circles under his eyes. He never ate much before games and only placed two pieces of toast on his plate along with a small pile of eggs, quickly shoveling it all into his mouth. He looked like he was barely chewing, just swallowing the food whole in one go.

“Are you nervous, Harry?” Luna said, as she took a seat next to them. Regulus found himself wondering where she kept the Monster books during the day, if they stayed in her dorm room, terrorizing her dormmates whenever they entered the room, or if they were free to roam the castle like a pack of wild dogs.

“Not really,” Harry said with a shrug, though Regulus could see tension pulling at his eyes. He wondered what was weighing on Harry’s mind. Luna looked equally unconvinced by Harry’s answer, but Harry was up and out of his seat before she could continue the conversation, walking briskly out of the Great Hall in the direction of the pitch.

The game was mostly quick and uneventful, to Regulus’s relief. Gryffindor did win the Cup, which Regulus was excited about, though mostly just because he got to see Harry celebrate, looking like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Exams were approaching quickly, and Regulus spent most of his time in the library surrounded by his friends. He wasn’t really worried about any of them, though he spent a little extra time on Care of Magical Creatures given that he’d never taken the subject before



and that Hagrid had barely spent any time on creatures after the fiasco with Buckbeak. He didn't think he would do well on the Divination final, given that he had almost no talent for the subject, but he at least made sure that he knew the basics well enough to pass.

Regulus could hardly believe that the year had gone by so quickly. He had made next to no progress on his search for more Horcruxes. If he was honest, he'd completely forgotten about it with everything that was happening that year. He knew he needed to figure it out, whether or not Sirius was caught, but it felt like such a distant problem when he was at Hogwarts.

He was in the library late one night, reading through one of the advanced books on Divination when Draco approached him. The others had already gone off to bed, burnt out from a long day of studying. Draco didn't wait for Regulus to greet him before he took a seat across from him.

"I figured it out," Draco said. Regulus set his book down slowly, taking in the blonde boy. He looked smug, not an unusual occurrence for Draco, but there was an assuredness about him that put Regulus on alert.

"Figured what out?" Regulus drawled, watching Draco carefully.

"You're not his son," Draco replied, his smug smirk stretching into a genuine smile for a moment like he was unreasonably proud of himself.

"So you said before," Regulus replied, making his voice sound as bored and unbothered as possible.

"Yeah," Draco said. "You're his brother." How— Regulus cut off his thoughts. His Occlumency walls went up without him even trying, though he knew there was no way Draco could access his thoughts. He highly doubted that the boy was a skilled Legilimens. He was sure if Draco had that skill he would know about it, given how annoying he would be no doubt poking around Harry's thoughts.

"What makes you say that?" Regulus asked carefully, doing his best not to give anything away.

"I don't know how you did it," Draco said, casually spreading his hands out in front of him while he leaned back in his chair. "But you've made yourself look younger, using glamours or something I'm guessing."

Regulus scoffed. "Glamours are easily removed," Regulus said. "Surely you already know that. Would you like me to teach you how to do it?"

"I know how to do it," Draco replied, looking momentarily ruffled at being challenged. He pulls out his wand and pointed it directly in Regulus's face. Regulus did his best not to flinch. "*Auferotum*."

Regulus felt the spell wash over him, but of course, there was nothing to remove. "See?" Regulus questioned easily.

“Well,” Draco said, his shoulders moved up and down like an angry shrug, and his face twisted uncomfortably. “Maybe that’s not how you’re doing it,” he finally said. “But that doesn’t change who you are.”

“What are you even talking about, Draco?” Regulus said. Draco practically growled in frustration before pulling something out of his robe and slamming it on the table in front of Regulus.

“I know this is you!” Draco nearly shouted. Madam Pince shushed them from across the library. He pointed his finger down fiercely at what Regulus now realized was a picture. Regulus peered at it curiously before realizing what it was. It was a picture of the Slytherin Quidditch team from the first year that Regulus was on the team. There he was, dead center next to Slughorn, the head of Slytherin house at the time.

Regulus tried to decide whether it was worth continuing to lie to Draco. He had clearly gone to great lengths to find the image, but how he managed to get it was a curiosity. He remembered them taking the picture, it was unusual for a head of house to stand with the team, but Slughorn always insisted. Regulus was pretty sure that he burned his copy of the picture almost immediately after they lost their first game against Gryffindor.

“Don’t lie, I know that it’s you. You look exactly like him, and there is no Regulus Black III on the family tree,” Draco whispered furiously. “How are you even here? My mother said that you died.”

“How did you get this picture?” Regulus asked after a long empty silence. He looked up to see Draco looking very triumphant.

“My mother had it,” Draco said. “I wasn’t sure at first, but I know now. You’re Regulus Black II, aren’t you?”

Regulus sighed defeatedly. “Yes.”

“I knew it!” Draco said.

“Silence!” Madam Pince yelled. Regulus was almost certain that they were the only two students still in the library.

“Why are you here? Are you working with Sirius Black?” Draco asked quickly.

“I’m not working with him,” Regulus said with an exaggerated eye roll. “I’ve already told you that. I’m trying to stop him from getting to Harry.”

“Did you know he was going to break out? Is that why you came to school with us in first year?” Draco asked. The smugness seemed to have faded into genuine curiosity and concern.

“Sirius isn’t the only person that wants to hurt Harry,” Regulus replied. “I intend to stop them.” Draco’s looked confused.

“Who else wants to hurt Harry?” Draco replied. “You don’t mean—” he looked around conspiratorially, “the Dark Lord, do you?”

“What do you know about the Dark Lord?” Regulus asked sharply. Draco leaned back instinctively. His eyes had grown brighter during their conversation, it was subtle, but Regulus still noticed the oddly inhuman look to them.

“Nothing really,” Draco answered. Regulus was surprised by the honesty, though Draco’s face quickly morphed back into a superior smirk. “I know you were one of his followers.”

Regulus couldn’t stop himself from cringing. “Did your father tell you that?” Regulus asked. Draco looked mildly offended for a second.

“You think I would talk to my father about this?” Draco asked incredulously. Regulus did not understand his reaction, but it hardly mattered as they were interrupted by Madam Pince, who quickly shoed them out of the library.

Regulus worried about what Draco would do with his newfound information and confronted him the next day.

“What do you want?” Draco asked as Regulus pulled him aside.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Regulus said. “At all. Not even your mother.”

“Or what?” Draco replied snidely.

“Or I’ll obliviate you,” Regulus said simply. “I can’t have anyone knowing about who I am.”

“Wait, no one else knows? Harry doesn’t know?” Draco asked.

“No, no one else knows,” Regulus replied. Draco didn’t need to know about Dumbledore or Luna’s involvement.

“I’m not going to tell anyone,” Draco said after a second. “How are you planning to catch Sirius?”

“I’m not involving you in that plan,” Regulus said simply. “Now swear on your magic that you won’t tell anyone.” Draco looked annoyed but complied. Regulus thought he might get more trouble from Draco but instead, Draco seemed to take their shared secret as an invitation to involve himself in whatever Regulus was doing. Nearly every time Regulus was alone after that Draco would approach him and ask him about his plan. It didn’t help that Regulus had no plan and that every time he spoke to Draco he was reminded of his own uselessness.

The exams were easy, at least for the most part. Regulus proceeded as he did in the previous years by tempering his magical ability so that he wouldn’t be top of the class. Although, by now he wondered if Hermione would still beat him regardless. He was slightly worried about his Muggle Studies exam, so many of the topics still seemed fantastical and bizarre to him (electricity still made absolutely no sense to him), but it went as well as it could have.

Lupin had continued to avoid Regulus, not even making eye contact with him in class. Even during Lupin's obstacle course style exam, Lupin all but avoided him. Regulus proceeded fine through the exam before he arrived at the old trunk that he had to climb into to battle a boggart.

Regulus had avoided thinking about his boggart. He never considered himself very brave and when he thought back to things that scared him, there were several things that came to mind. He worried about coming face-to-face with the Dark Lord or James or Harry's corpse or any number of things really. He had trouble even conceptualizing it. It wasn't until he was in the trunk and saw what the boggart turned into that he thought, *oh, of course*.

Inside the trunk was dark and hollow. It had been charmed so that it was almost impossibly wide and open, but it was filled with shadows. The boggart began to shift and change instantly before disappearing. Or at least, he thought it disappeared. But upon closer inspection, he realized what he was seeing was actually a pool of water that seemed to be growing, inching closer to him.

Regulus hadn't even realized that he was backing away before his back hit the wall behind him. He yelped, startled by the sudden contact. Why water? He thought, though he realized the answer only a moment later. His hands were shaking as he raised his wand. What was the spell? He knew it, he did, he just couldn't think straight. The water started to fill his shoes. He couldn't be drowned by a boggart, could he? It wasn't until he felt the cold dead hand circle around his ankle that he remembered.

"*Riddikulus*," he hissed. The flood before him shifted into a pile of glitter. It reminded him of Luna for some reason and a small chuckle slipped out of him. Not enough of a laugh to defeat the thing, but enough to give him time to scurry out of the trunk. He climbed out with shaky limbs, doing his best to appear unfazed and normal.

Lupin was looking at him with open shock on his face before he steeled himself. "Well done," he muttered. Regulus didn't even spare him a response, instead turning and marching himself right up to the castle. He felt like he was going to be sick. Cold sweat had drenched his clothes, and the wet cloth sticking to his skin made him feel jumpy. He needed to dry off, change and never think about this again.

He heard Harry yelling after him, but Regulus didn't turn. He lost track of where he was going, only coming to when he was back in the dorm and pulling the wet clothes off. He cast a drying spell on himself before following it up with a towel, rubbing his skin until it was red and raw. He still had his Divination final to get to and that was the only reason he was able to re-dress in dry clothes.

"She's seeing us all separately," Harry said when he arrived. All the students ahead of him must have already gone because they were the only two left. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Regulus said. "Just felt a bit ill, I'm fine," he repeated. Harry looked unconvinced. They both looked up when Ron came down the ladder. "How'd it go?" Harry asked.

"Ah, rubbish," Ron said, but he had an odd look in his eyes. "Probably nothing," he muttered before walking away.

“Harry Potter!” Trelawney called. Regulus sat down heavily in his chair. He tried not to think about the boggart, but his mind kept drifting back to it. It was so obvious in retrospect. The moment of his death was something Regulus worked very, very hard not to relive. He had all but mastered it, but now it was clawing its way to the surface of his thoughts.

Regulus had, unintentionally, created a hard line in his head between his first and second life. James’s death should have haunted him, the grief so intense that he knew if he’d lived through it the first time, it would have gutted him alive. But James had never been alive during his second life, he was already gone, buried in the ground. It made it easy to forget everything Regulus lost.

Now though, with the memory of his last moments as he was clawed by inferi and drowned in the cold water of the cave, he could feel the grief of James’s death boiling up. He took several large breaths, trying to fill his lungs to stop the panic that was wrapping around his ribs like strong arms attempting to crush him.

He needed to get this under control. He couldn’t let Harry see him like this. As if his thoughts had summoned him, Harry came down the ladder quicker than Regulus would have thought possible. He was pale, his eyes opened wide as if he’d just been attacked.

“Harry, what?” Regulus said, standing up, forgetting his own panic immediately.

“Trelawney, her voice, it got all,” Harry babbled.

“Sit down, try to breathe, tell me what happened,” Regulus said, holding Harry by the shoulders as Harry took a seat.

“Regulus Black!” Trelawney’s voice called.

“Shoot,” Regulus mumbled. “Stay right here. I’ll get through it as quickly as possible.” Harry nodded, his knuckles were white where he was gripping the seat beneath him. Regulus did not want to leave him, but he hardly had a choice, unless he wanted to miss his exam completely.

The exam ended up being exclusively on crystal ball reading which Regulus found a little annoying. There wasn’t even a written portion. Trelawney gave him an unimpressed look as he sat down. “Tell me what you can see,” she said.

Regulus looked into the white fog of the crystal ball, but nothing was coming. He almost wanted to abandon it completely and go back to Harry before something moved. He had never, not once, seen something in Divination, but now he was sure, something was moving.

“It’s... It’s a-” Regulus said, trying to make out what he was seeing. The emotions he’d been avoiding for so long were still raw and open inside him. He wondered if they were causing him to hallucinate. “It looks like a rat tail.”

“Excellent,” Trelawney said. “Very good.” After that, Regulus saw nothing else. He was glad for it, not wanting to drag the exam out anymore. He rushed out of the room and came back to find Harry looking calm, picking at a loose string on his shirt.

“Harry,” Regulus said to get his attention. Harry looked up quickly and Regulus finally noticed the tension on his face. “Okay, tell me what happened?”

Harry looked up at the trap door that was still open. “Let’s talk on the way back to the common room,” Harry said quietly. Regulus nodded in agreement. “I think she might have just said a prophecy.”

“Who? Trelawney?” Regulus asked doubtfully.

Harry nodded his head vigorously. “I know it sounds crazy cause she’s always saying ridiculous stuff. But her voice changed, and she didn’t remember it after the fact.”

“Okay, okay,” Regulus said, trying to slow Harry down. “What did she say?”

“I can’t remember it all,” Harry replied, sounding frustrated. “But it was something about the Dark Lord’s servant breaking free of his chain and the Dark Lord rising again. Regulus, she said it’s going to happen tonight! She said he’d been chained for twelve years!”

Harry was full-on shouting and Regulus felt like he might pass out in the middle of the hall. “I think we should tell Dumbledore,” Regulus said and Harry agreed.

They never made it to Dumbledore’s office though. Ron and Hermione interrupted them on their way.

“Buckbeak lost his appeal,” Ron said miserably. “Hagrid just sent this.” The letter from Hagrid was simple, Buckbeak was about to be executed.

“We have to go,” Hermione said, looking very upset. Regulus looked at Harry and Harry nodded. They would go to Dumbledore after visiting Hagrid. Regulus was glad he’d thought to go back for Harry’s invisibility cloak after Harry stupidly left it in the passageway to Honeydukes. Really, anyone could have stolen it, Regulus thought.

They all crowded under the cloak which was just barely big enough to cover them all and waddled down awkwardly toward Hagrid’s hut just before dinner began. Hagrid was a mess, understandably. Regulus felt awful for him and Buckbeak, worse still because he had barely been there for Hagrid all year. It was so hectic with everything going on that it had slipped his mind.

“Ron! I don’t believe it!” Hermione yelled, interrupting Hagrid’s conversation with Harry. “It’s Scabbers!” Scabbers had apparently been hiding out in Hagrid’s hut for who knows how long. Regulus couldn’t get the image of a rat’s tail out of his head from his Divination exam. Ron barely had time to enjoy being reunited with his pet as Hagrid’s voice cut through.

“They’re comin’,” he said. They all did their best to get out of Hagrid’s undetected, but Scabbers was wiggling wildly in Ron’s hands distracting them. They were still in earshot when they heard the undeniable swish and thud of an axe.

“I can’t believe they did it,” Hermione whispered. She looked ill. Regulus gripped her elbow to steady her and started dragging them all up to the castle.

They were almost up the hill when Scabbers bit Ron and went running off. It was chaos after that. Ron ran after the rat, abandoning the group. Crookshanks appeared from Merlin knew where and went after them.

“Crookshanks! No, go away!” Hermione complained. They tried to follow Ron, but it was difficult to move under the invisibility cloak. Regulus pulled it off of them, balling it up to stuff into his robe pocket. They made it to Ron, finding him lying on the ground stuffing a wiggling Scabbers into his pocket.

“Ron, come on!” Hermione began to say, but was interrupted by the sound of heavy paws hitting the ground. Suddenly, a huge black dog came bounding out of the forest toward them. Regulus reached for his wand, but the dog hit him hard in the chest, pushing him to the ground. Regulus tried to get up as fast as he could, but the dog was already dragging Ron under the trunk of the Whomping Willow, Ron’s leg snapping grotesquely as it hooked on the roots.

“We need to go for help,” Hermione yelled. The branches of the tree were waving around violently by that point, and they were having trouble getting past them fast enough to follow Ron and the dog.

“That thing’s big enough to eat him, we haven’t got time,” Harry yelled back. Regulus cast the strongest *immobulus* that he could manage and though it didn’t fully freeze the violent tree, it was enough to slow the movements so they could follow.

The tunnel opened into a direct slope to the ground below causing them to all slide down ungracefully. Regulus could see the trail Ron’s body had left on the dirt floor down the pathway.

“Come on,” Regulus said. “And stay behind me.” As they walked forward, Crookshanks came up along beside them, walking like he did every day.

“Crookshanks?” Hermione questioned.

“He’s friends with that dog,” Harry muttered. “I’ve seen them together.” Regulus turned enough to look at him.

“That’s the dog you’ve been seeing?” Regulus asked. Harry nodded. “Maybe you both should go back and get a professor.” Regulus felt like beating his head against the wall. Why hadn’t he thought of that before they were in the tunnel?

“No way!” Harry said. “I’m not leaving Ron down here.”

“I’m not even sure how to get back out,” Hermione reasoned.

“Right,” Regulus muttered and continued walking. “Any idea where this tunnel lets out?”

“Not sure,” Harry answered. “I’ve seen it on the map, but it just goes off the edge. I always assumed it ended up in Hogsmeade somewhere.”

They ended up crawling up a trapdoor into an old dusty room. The furniture was half destroyed and covered with a layer of dirt that made it seem like no one had been there in years.

“I think we’re in the Shrieking Shack,” Hermione whispered. It sounded very loud in the quiet room. They heard a creak overhead.

“Let’s go, but *stay behind me*,” Regulus repeated. Hermione and Harry both nodded, looking terribly worried. They made it up to a bedroom with a huge four-poster bed. It was just as dusty as the rest of the house. Ron was lying on the ground, clutching his leg that was sticking out at an odd angle.

Regulus ran across the room, Harry and Hermione just behind him.

“Where’s the dog?” Harry asked.

“Are you all right?” Hermione asked at the same time.

“Not a dog,” Ron moaned. “It’s a trap.” Ron pointed behind them, and Regulus turned around so quickly that it felt almost like he’d apparated. The door behind them closed loudly.

Standing there was a walking corpse. Regulus thought it was an inferi for a moment before his eyes fully focused. No, this man was alive, though he was unkempt with filthy and matted hair that hung well down his back. His eyes were sunken into his skull and his skin stretched so tightly across his face that it looked like it would tear if he moved too quickly.

“Sirius,” Regulus whispered.



# the shrieking shack.

## Chapter Notes

we're finally here. i hope you all enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“Expelliarmus!”* Sirius croaked. He was holding Ron’s wand in his skeletal hand. Regulus felt his own wand ripped from his fingers, as were Harry’s and Hermione’s, and Sirius caught them easily.

“Fuck,” Regulus whispered.

“I thought you’d come and help your friend,” Sirius said, taking a small step toward them, his legs shook beneath him, and Regulus found himself wondering how Sirius was even standing. “Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you, to not run for a teacher. I’m grateful, it’ll make things easier.”

His voice was scratchy from disuse, or maybe as if he’d been screaming continuously for several hours. His words were odd though. Regulus felt like he was missing something. Well, more than that, he felt like was going to vibrate out of his skin. He’d managed to get cornered without his wand by Sirius the moment he entered the room. Worse than that, he’d managed to do it with Ron, Hermione, and Harry in the room, directly in danger, once again because of Regulus’s incompetence.

He hadn’t realized it before that moment, but he had basically assumed that Sirius would be far less proficient with magic given his twelve years in Azkaban. This was, of course, a completely ridiculous and absurd assumption to make, not to mention an incredibly dangerous one given that Sirius had managed to disarm him within only a few seconds.

All of these thoughts seemed to hit him at once, and he struggled to parse through them fast enough to move on. Really though, it had only been a second since Sirius had spoken. He was speaking to Harry, that much was clear by the mention of James. Harry had been standing next to Regulus, but upon hearing Sirius’s words, he lunged forward as if to attack.

“No, Harry!” Hermione said with a gasp, pulling him back roughly. Her face was pale and scared. Regulus could see the way her fingers turned white when they gripped Harry’s shirt.

“If you want to kill Harry, you’ll have to kill us too!” Ron said fiercely, and to Regulus’s dismay, began trying to stand on his mangled leg. Regulus turned just enough to shove Ron to the ground.

“Lie down,” Sirius spoke at the same time as Regulus moved. “You’ll damage that leg even more.” It was such a strange thing for him to say considering it was his fault that Ron’s leg

was broken in the first place.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Ron said, though his voice had grown weak and strained. His breathing was labored, and it seemed like he was fighting against the pain to stay awake.

“Ron, stop,” Regulus whispered. Ron looked at him with confounded eyes for a moment before they went hazy with pain. Hermione crouched next to him, holding his shoulders down, so that he wouldn’t try to stand again.

“No, there will only be one murder tonight,” Sirius said with an unsettling smile stretching across his face. Sirius raised Ron’s wand slowly. Regulus stepped in front of Harry. He would die before he let Sirius hurt him.

“Why’s that?” Harry spat. He tried to run forward again, stepping around Regulus’s frame, but Regulus held him back, gripping onto his clothes tight enough that Harry couldn’t pull away. He continued to yell at Sirius, almost taunting him about the murders Sirius had committed. It made Regulus’s stomach twist uncomfortable.

“Harry, please,” Regulus implored, holding him as tightly as he could. His fingers were starting to hurt from how intensely he was clenching them on Harry’s clothes.

“Harry! Be quiet!” Hermione said at the same time that Regulus spoke. Her voice was equal parts admonishing and pleading, almost as if she thought Harry taunting Sirius about his crimes was against some decorous rule.

“He killed my mum and dad!” Harry yelled sharply, his voice wavering a little on the word ‘mum.’ It made Regulus feel like his chest was concaving on itself. His fingers loosened without his permission, and it was that moment of weakness that allowed Harry to break free.

He charged at Sirius like a wild animal, so quickly that Sirius didn’t even have time to raise his wand. Or perhaps it was the shock that Harry would even think of running at him without a wand in hand. Regardless, he managed to hit Sirius hard in the face, his fist colliding with the side of Sirius’s cheek, so roughly that Regulus could hear the smack it made. Sirius fell backward, crashing into the wall behind him with a loud noise.

Hermione was screaming, standing up straight now. Ron was trying to push himself up, yelling as well. Sirius shot out a charm that looked like a Stunning Spell, an odd choice for a man insistent on murder, Regulus just barely had time to note, as the spell missed Harry’s face by a few inches. Regulus ran forward as well, watching Sirius grab Harry around the throat with his free hand, the other one fighting wildly in Harry’s grasp.

“No,” Sirius grunted. “I’ve waited too long—” Regulus kicked out as hard as he could, his foot crashing into Sirius’s ribs harshly. Sirius gasped in pain and let go of Harry. Ron had somehow crawled across the room and had managed to wrestle Sirius’s wand from his hand.

Sirius fought like a dying animal caught in a trap, throwing limbs out fiercely and desperately. His free hand collided with Regulus’s leg hard enough for Regulus to stumble in pain. Regulus had no idea how Sirius managed to be strong enough to damage him, given the

emaciated state of his body. He managed to get a foot between himself and Harry and with a loud grunt he kicked Harry off. Harry lurched backward, falling heavily onto the floor.

Regulus grabbed for the wand Sirius had dropped, it had rolled away from Ron who was panting heavily, his face red with exertion and twisted into an awful mask of suffering. The moment Regulus's fingers circled around the wand though, Crookshanks came through the door and sunk both of his claws deep into Regulus's arm.

"Ah," Regulus gasped in pain, trying to shake the retched thing off of himself. The nails in his skin smarted like hell, and he ground his teeth together to keep from yelling out again.

"Crookshanks! No!" Hermione yelled, running forward to pull the cat off just as Regulus managed to dislodge it. Crookshanks slipped from Hermione's grasp and landed on the floor gracefully. Harry was back on his feet and aimed a kick at the cat who quickly scurried out of the way.

Sirius, now free from interference, scrambled up so that he was standing, just as Harry grabbed the wand Regulus had been reaching for. "Get out of the way!" Harry yelled. Hermione stepped to the side so that Harry could face off against Sirius. Ron, who was nearly helpless on the ground, rolled onto his side with a loud groan. Regulus stepped in front of Harry despite the wand he brandished in front of him.

"Harry, stop," Regulus said, though his eyes never left Sirius.

"Going to kill me, Harry?" Sirius whispered manically. His eyes were nearly black with adrenaline. There was that odd feeling again, Regulus thought. Something about the way Sirius looked, about the way he talked, felt so strange to him. He was sure he was missing something.

Sirius, for his part, did not look like a man afraid of death. Instead, he almost looked like he would have welcomed it. A huge bruise was forming about Sirius's eyes and his nose was bleeding, but he seemed unbothered, just continuing to look at Harry with his fathomless black eyes.

"You killed my parents," Harry said. His voice was wavering dangerously like he was hoping it wasn't true like he was wishing his parents were there in the room with him instead of long dead. Harry moved just enough so that he could point the wand over Regulus's shoulder.

Sirius stared at Harry with a haunted look. "I don't deny it," he whispered. "But if you knew the whole story—"

Sirius and Harry were arguing again, but Regulus could only listen. Sirius still had their wands, but he hadn't pulled them out. He stood like a man waiting for his execution, arms out and against the wall, face shallow and guilty.

"You've got to listen to me," Sirius said, his voice growing urgent and panicked as if he'd just realized what was happening. Harry was responding, but Regulus wasn't listening. He had finally realized what was so odd. Sirius wasn't looking at him. Even when Regulus had

kicked Sirius in the ribs, Sirius hadn't acknowledged his presence. None of his words were directed at Regulus, and his eyes never once landed on him.

Crookshanks jumped onto Sirius's chest. "Get off," Sirius said softly, gently trying to push the animal. Harry raised his wand further, and Regulus was surprised to see that it was held steady, aimed directly at Sirius. The tense moment lingered, none of them moving or shifting, all waiting for the next shoe to drop. Regulus wondered if he should intervene, but despite Harry's threat of killing Sirius, Regulus was sure the thirteen-year-old did not know how to cast a Killing Curse. Not to mention that a child that age would probably be unable to do so.

There was a loud creak from the floor below followed by muffled footsteps pounding up the stairs. "We're up here!" Hermione screamed. Sirius began fighting against Crookshanks in earnest. Harry looked dismayed like he couldn't decide what to do, and in his moment of distraction, Regulus took the wand out of his hand.

"Get back," Regulus said, pushing Harry so that he would stumble backward. He moved forward and grabbed Ron from beneath his arms dragging him toward the bed. Ron yelped in pain and surprise but relaxed the moment his back hit the edge of the bed frame. Hermione had just joined on that side of the room when the door burst open.

Lupin came crashing into the room, his face pale and drawn in panic. He looked around at each of them, making eye contact carefully and looking alarmed when he took in Ron with his mutilated leg. He looked at Sirius next, still fighting against Crookshanks.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Lupin shouted. Though his wand was pointed at Sirius, the wand in Regulus's hand flew out of his grasp as well.

"Argh!" Regulus yelled in frustration. Lupin caught them all smoothly. His face was doing an odd dance between trepidation, relief, and something else that Regulus did not want to acknowledge.

When he opened his mouth to speak, his voice sounded bizarre. It rumbled out of his chest like a thunderstorm. "Where is he, Sirius?"

Sirius was watching Lupin with the same mix of emotions that Lupin held. Sirius's emotions looked horrifying on his thin, waxy skin. Regulus didn't understand how Lupin wasn't actively recoiling from the way Sirius looked. Regulus could barely make out the brother he'd once known under the pile of matted hair and dirty clothes. What could Lupin possibly be seeing there? Regulus did not want to think about it.

Slowly, in response to Lupin's question, Sirius raised a shaking hand and pointed straight at Ron. Regulus looked down in confusion before looking back to see Lupin watching them all with a dazed look on his face.

"But then," Lupin began babbling on. He was making no sense, something about a switch and them not telling Lupin about something. Regulus was having trouble following it, but Sirius was watching Lupin with rapt attention and when Lupin finally fell quiet, Sirius slowly nodded his head, a mild look of disbelief crossing his face.

“Professor,” Harry said loudly. “What’s going on?” Lupin didn’t answer him, instead, he slowly lowered his wand, his gaze never leaving Sirius. Lupin walked forward to where Sirius was half crouched against the wall and reached down to pull Sirius to his feet. Crookshanks fell to the floor as Lupin all but lifted Sirius, embracing him tightly in his arms. Sirius was quivering slightly, but Lupin looked completely steady.

“I knew it,” Regulus practically hissed. Regulus could feel every set of eyes in the room settle on him in shock, even Sirius, who looked completely bewildered. Sirius glanced between Lupin and Regulus rapidly as if surprised that Lupin had reacted to Regulus’s voice at all.

“Mr. — Regulus,” Lupin said, pulling away from Sirius enough to turn toward Regulus.

“I knew you were —” Regulus started to say, pointing at Lupin accusingly.

“Regulus, calm down —” Lupin begged, dropping his arms from where they had been circling Sirius, though he left one hand on Sirius’s arm like he couldn’t bear to let him go.

“The two of you! You’re working together!” Regulus yelled, taking another step forward. He heard Hermione gasp behind him. “I should have —”

“What?” Ron said confusedly.

“I don’t know,” Harry replied quietly.

“Please, just listen,” Lupin said loudly. His voice seemed to jolt Sirius from a strange stupor that he’d fallen into.

“Wha — what’s going on?” Sirius said, stumbling over his words. He was looking incredulously between Regulus and Lupin. His voice seemed to cut through the rising tension mounting in the room. “How —”

Sirius looked at Regulus, but Regulus noticed that every time his eyes fell on him, they would grow distant like his mind was forcing him not to focus on Regulus too hard, as if Regulus wasn’t supposed to be there. “Sirius,” Remus whispered.

“Who are you?” Sirius said quietly, his voice filled with dismay. Regulus could see that he was actively trying to get his eyes to center on Regulus now. He wasn’t letting them drift away like they had been doing since they entered the room. His eyebrows furrowed like he was in pain.

“That’s,” Remus started to say before breaking off with an odd-sounding cough. “That’s your son.” The way he said it was so bizarre that Regulus almost felt like laughing. He sounded like he was stuck between betrayal, heartbreak, hope and yearning.

“My —” Sirius choked. “My what?” He looked at Remus like he’d just pulled out a knife and stabbed himself.

Lupin’s face did something complicated that Regulus couldn’t decipher. It looked almost like he was demanding that Sirius answer for his crimes but at the same time, was begging him to

plead innocent. “Your son. Regulus,” Lupin replied. Lupin and Sirius stared at each other for a long few moments. They looked like they were having a silent conversation, but given the way that Sirius’s face morphed into one of incredulity, he didn’t think that it was a very productive one.

Finally, Sirius opened his mouth and said with a scoff, “I would never name my son *Regulus*.”

Regulus had been surprised by how Harry had charged at Sirius earlier, without a wand and completely defenseless. But now. Now, he understood. The way Sirius said his name like it was a curse, like it was something so far beneath him that he couldn’t believe he was even being made to say it, made Regulus lose it.

One moment he was across the room, standing guard before three teenagers, and the next moment he was knocking Sirius to the floor so roughly that he was surprised Sirius’s head didn’t crack open on the hardwood. He hadn’t hit his brother since he was thirteen when they got into a brawl in the middle of the hallway and had to be pulled apart by Slughorn. He had almost forgotten what it felt like.

His fists cracked against Sirius’s face so intensely that he felt vaguely worried that he might break his hands. Sirius, already bleeding from the earlier assault, could do little else but try to push Regulus off from where he had throttled him. Regulus didn’t know if it was Sirius’s already bloody nose or the skin of his knuckles splitting open, but regardless, his hands were quickly getting covered in blood, making it difficult to land the continuous punches he was throwing.

“You’re such a fucking bastard,” Regulus spat, pulling his arm back just to hit Sirius in the face again and again. Lupin must have been properly shocked by the display because it took him far too long to jump into action. He eventually managed it though and grabbed Regulus around the chest and wrenched him off of Sirius, pulling him back two steps.

Sirius looked up at him dazedly from his place on the floor, his skeletal face bloody and nearly unrecognizable. His eyes though, his eyes looked alive and alert for the first time since they entered the room. He didn’t move to stand up, instead, he brought his hands up to gingerly touch his own face.

“Reggie?” he whispered. He was staring at Regulus with open awe and confusion. He looked like he was trying desperately to take in every single detail of Regulus who, for his part, was fighting hopelessly against Lupin’s strong grasp, aiming to get back to the task of beating his stupid traitor brother to a bloody pulp. “I don’t understand,” Sirius said.

“Regulus?” Lupin said and Regulus could feel Lupin’s voice rumbling in his chest, vibrating against his back. It sounded different than how he’d said his name before. “Your Regulus?” He directed the question at Sirius, the only indicator of what he actually meant by the question. Sirius looked uncertain for a moment before nodding faintly.

“Let me go,” Regulus said angrily, though he was quickly losing steam. He felt wired and angry and exhausted all at once.

“Just listen,” Lupin said. “Please listen.” Regulus writhed weakly, cursing Lupin and his stupid werewolf strength. Not to mention the fact that Regulus was in a weak thirteen-year-old body.

“You killed James,” Regulus spat. “You killed him!” A look of horrible guilt crossed Sirius’s face.

“I did,” Sirius whispered back, his voice raspy and haunted. Regulus pulled roughly away from Lupin, but Lupin held him steady, not allowing him to move. He had to get to Sirius, the rage and grief welling up inside of him. It was becoming unmanageable. He felt a sob wrench itself from his throat.

“No, Sirius, no,” Lupin begged. “Just listen,” he repeated. “We can explain everything.”

“Then explain it! Explain why you killed them. Tell me why,” Regulus said, he wanted his voice to sound firm and commanding, but instead it sounded like he was whining, like a child who just had their favorite toy taken away. Sirius was still looking at him with that hollow gaze as if he still couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing.

Lupin seemed to have had enough of Regulus fighting against him and spun them around, moving so that he could stand between Regulus and Sirius, breaking their eye contact. Lupin crouched down just enough so he was eye to eye with Regulus. “You don’t know the full story,” he said. His voice was pleading and firm at the same time.

“Then tell me it!” Regulus yelled. He tried to shove Lupin’s arms off of him, but Lupin barely budged.

“You have to calm down,” Lupin said. “I will tell you everything. I’ll tell all of you everything.” He directed the last sentence at Harry, Hermione, and Ron. Regulus had completely forgotten that they were in the room still. He wondered why they hadn’t bothered to intervene, but when he looked back he found a *Protego* shield blocking their way. Ron was still on the ground, Hermione next to him, but Harry had his hands against the shield looking very annoyed.

“Why did you do that?” Regulus asked. Lupin made a noise that almost sounded like a laugh.

“I didn’t,” he answered. Regulus was silent for a long moment while Lupin’s words settled in.

“Oh,” Regulus said, an embarrassed flush warming his face. He didn’t have a wand, so he had no idea how he’d managed to put up a shield so strong that Harry couldn’t even walk through it. He concentrated on his magic and the shield finally fell.

Harry stomped forward immediately and shoved Lupin, causing him to finally drop his grasp on Regulus. Lupin stumbled back slightly, and Harry grabbed Regulus’s arm, dragging him back to their side of the room. “Tell us what happened,” Harry said. “Now.”

Lupin looked unsurprised by Harry's actions, but Sirius, who was still lying completely still on the ground, looked absolutely incredulous. Like he couldn't believe Harry would do something like that, that he would choose Regulus over Lupin. As if they didn't enter the room together, Regulus thought, mentally shaking his head.

Lupin seemed momentarily at a loss for what to do, but suddenly Ron jerked and held onto his pocket again where Scabbers was trying to wiggle free. Sirius's eyes snapped to Ron's pocket and he was on his feet so quickly that Regulus couldn't even track how he'd done it. He lunged at Ron, and Lupin held him back. Crookshanks was hissing loudly, also watching Ron's pocket.

"Sirius, NO!" Lupin yelled. "Wait, we've got to explain." Lupin had his arms wrapped around Sirius's small waist.

"We can explain afterward!" Sirius snarled. He and Lupin wrestled awkwardly, but Lupin easily overpowered Sirius. Regulus watched the interaction closely and something finally clicked.

"This has something to do with Ron's rat?" he asked softly. Both Lupin and Sirius stopped fighting and looked at him with shock. "I highly doubt you're here to kill Ron," Regulus explained.

"What?" Ron shouted. "What's my rat got to do with anything?" He was looking between them all with wide eyes. Hermione looked just as confused, but Harry only looked irritated like he wanted everyone to get on with it already.

"That's not a rat," Sirius said after a long silence.

"He's an Animagus," Regulus said, speaking before he even fully realized what was happening. "Isn't he?" It made sense, given the fact that Sirius was also apparently a secret Animagus.

"Yes," Lupin answered immediately. "That right there," he said, pointing to Ron's pocket, "is Peter Pettigrew."

Chaos erupted again with that statement. Hermione faintly said, "That's ridiculous." While Harry yelled, "Peter Pettigrew is dead! You killed him twelve years ago," while pointing at Sirius's rage-filled face. He was trying to get at Scabbers again, fighting desperately against Lupin who just looked overwhelmed.

"Enough!" Regulus yelled. The room fell into an eerie silence. Regulus waited for a beat before speaking, softly, but through his clenched teeth. "Prove to me that it's Peter and tell me what's going on."

"Just get on with it, Remus," Sirius snapped, finally going lax in Lupin's grasp. "I've waited twelve years for this, I'm not waiting much longer."

"Right, of course. Well, what you need to know about me is that I'm — "



“A werewolf,” Hermione cut him off. “We know.” Harry and Ron gasped.

“I didn’t know that,” Ron said loudly before looking at Remus with thinly veiled disgust.

“Me either,” Harry agreed, though he mostly just looked shocked and confused.

“That’s because you guys never do the homework,” Hermione said with a light air of superiority. Regulus rolled his eyes.

“How —” Lupin started to say, he looked vaguely horrified and ashamed.

“Snape’s class on werewolves,” Regulus said. He felt almost apologetic, he probably would be if he was talking to anyone other than Lupin.

“Snape?” Sirius interrupted harshly, finally looking away from Ron’s pocket and glancing up at Regulus. “What’s Snape got to do with this?”

“He’s here, Sirius,” Lupin replied with a heavy sigh. “He’s teaching at Hogwarts.” A look of disgust and anger crossed Sirius’s face.

“Can you *please* get to the point?” Regulus yelled.

“Right, of course,” Lupin finally said, taking a long deep breath. “I was bit when I was a young boy...”

“Oh for the love of Merlin,” Regulus mumbled, but Lupin continued to talk and Regulus settled in for what he was sure would be a long explanation. He didn’t want to listen; he wanted to go back to hitting his brother repeatedly in the face, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione were watching intensely. Regulus leaned against one of the posters of the four-poster bed and waited.

The story that unfolded was completely ridiculous. Apparently, Lupin had been a werewolf throughout his entire Hogwarts career, having been bit long before he started first year. Regulus wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that he’d gone to school with a werewolf. And Sirius, along with Peter Pettigrew and James had decided to become illegal Animagi so that they could help Lupin during the full moons.

“My dad too?” Harry had asked, but Regulus remained silent. James had been an Animagus during their entire relationship and had never bothered to mention it. Regulus felt hurt, despite the fact that it had happened years ago. Still, he wondered what else James kept from him. Regulus supposed that he couldn’t really blame James for not trusting him, given how Regulus’s turned out, but still, it felt like someone was silently gutting him.

Regulus also learned that James helped create the Marauder’s map that Harry had been using that year. How Fred and George had managed to get their hands on it was a mystery to him. It made sense though that it was James, along with the others, who made it. He had thought that the names on the map sounded familiar and now that it was confirmed, he thought he remembered hearing Sirius call James ‘Prongs’ more than once.

The story about Sirius playing a prank on Snape that nearly got Snape killed explained so many things, but most notably, the weird falling out that Regulus had witnessed the year before James and he started dating. He remembered watching Sirius grow pale and skinny, no longer attending meals or spending time with his friends. Regulus had been growing worried about him, the thought of Sirius starving himself was keeping him up at night, but one day he finally came back to the Great Hall, Lily Evans at his side.

That was the main reason that made Regulus understand why James chose Lily over him. Lily did something that Regulus spent weeks pondering and worrying over uselessly. She simply reached out and helped Sirius as if it was the most natural thing in the world, despite the fact that Lily had openly hated Sirius and James for her first several years at Hogwarts. By the end of that year, Sirius and his friends were all chummy again, and it seemed like it all worked out. It was strange to hear Lupin mention that time so off-handedly like it didn't even bother him anymore.

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," Harry said. "He thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," Snape's voice cut through the room. He suddenly appeared in the doorway, removing a strong Disillusionment Charm he'd been wearing. Hermione screamed in shock and Lupin looked at Snape in horror. "You're wondering how I knew you were here?" Snape started to say, but Regulus cut him off.

"Snape!" Snape looked at him in surprise. "Shut up!" Regulus turned back to others. "Finish the stupid story! Did you kill James or didn't you?"

"Why you —" Snape began to say, his lip curling angrily.

"He didn't," Lupin interrupted.

"But you were their secret keeper," Regulus practically snarled, jumping ahead in the story. It had taken Lupin far too long to get to the point. He glared at Sirius with such overt hate and hurt that Sirius actually flinched.

"No, I — I convinced them to choose someone else. I thought I would be too obvious of a choice," Sirius said quietly.

"Enough of this," Snape said loudly.

"Shut up!" Regulus yelled again, though he wasn't the only one. Both Harry and Sirius spoke at the same exact time as Regulus. Snape sneered at them and raised his wand, pointing it at Sirius. Lupin stood between them.

"Please, can you just listen?" Lupin begged.

"No," Snape spat, opening his mouth to continue his sentence.

"Who was the secret keeper then?" Regulus said, addressing Sirius. "If it wasn't you."

"Peter Pettigrew," Lupin answered, though he didn't take his eyes off of Snape.

“Prove it then,” Regulus said. Sirius looked down at the wiggling rat again. Regulus looked down at Ron who was watching him like Regulus had lost his mind. “Ron, let me see Scabbers.”

“No! You’re crazy. I’m not going to let you hurt Scabbers!” Ron yelled. He looked like he was trying to stand on his damaged leg again, but Hermione moved to hold him still.

“Ron, please, you’ll hurt yourself,” Hermione pleaded.

“Scabbers won’t be hurt if he’s actually a rat,” Regulus explained. “You know the spell to change an Animagus into a person?” He asked Sirius who nodded. “Please, Ron.”

Ron watched him warily for a moment, before finally taking the rat out of his pocket. Sirius made a scuffling noise like he was fighting the desire to launch at the rat the moment he saw him. Regulus was glad he managed to hold himself back. Lupin and Snape were now both watching, though Snape was still holding his wand up, pointing it at Lupin and Sirius.

Scabbers was fighting against Ron’s firm grasp as hard as he could. Ron looked like he was struggling to hold the rat still. “Now,” Regulus said to Sirius. He forgot that Sirius didn’t have a wand, Lupin still holding all of them, but Lupin listened regardless and raised a steady wand. Snape just watched, to Regulus’s surprise, as if he couldn’t believe what was happening in front of him.

Lupin shot one last look at Sirius who simply nodded before he whispered a spell that Regulus couldn’t hear. One moment, there was a wiggling rat held tightly in Ron’s hands, and the next, a short man with thin, blonde hair and a large bald patch was standing in his place.

“Hello, Peter,” Sirius growled.

## Chapter End Notes

i posted this a day early because a few people on tumblr told me i should. find me at [maladaptivewriting](#) for updates and the like

## the full moon.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Regulus would look back on that night, he would wrestle with his own choices, going over again and again how he could have done something different. How he could have prevented Peter's escape. How he could have freed his brother that night. In the end, things happened the way they did. Peter escaped, and Sirius stayed a wanted man. Because Regulus failed to prevent that rat's escape, terrible, awful things came to pass.

Sometimes he would take solace in the fact that Trelawney gave her second of only two official prophecies about that night, that it was fated in a way that Regulus could have never changed even with the unstoppable and indecipherable magic that had brought him back to life. Most of the time though, this solace barely lasted. It was much more comfortable for Regulus to blame himself. He'd had years of practice doing so, and he fell back into it like it was muscle memory like he was exactly where he was meant to be, crucified among the guilty.

After Peter was changed from his Animagus rat form into his dilapidated human form, he immediately jumped into a cowardly dance of begging and arguing. Regulus barely remembered what all was said, what Peter argued, what Sirius or Lupin responded. It didn't matter, not really. He vaguely remembered Peter trying repeatedly to convince the room of Sirius's guilt. ("He's come to try and kill me again!" he pleaded with Lupin). It was to no avail though, Lupin could not be swayed against Sirius. Not again.

Despite Peter's arguments that Sirius was under the Dark Lord's thumb, that the Dark Lord was the reason Sirius managed to break out of prison, ("Voldemort taught me tricks?" Sirius had yelled back. Regulus was enterally grateful that he didn't flinch when Peter and Snape did), Lupin still looked at Sirius with awe and dreadful contentment as if a piece of himself had been missing for years, and he'd just managed to find it and wedge it back in place.

Peter even tried to argue that he was harmless. He had, in fact, lived in the same dorm as all of them for three years at that point and had never once made a move against them, even though it would have been easy. They were so vulnerable in that room. ("You see, Remus? I have never hurt a hair on Harry's head!" Peter said, his voice was so whiny that Regulus wanted to rip out his vocal cords so that he never had to hear him speak ever again).

Lupin was unswayed, as was Regulus, though he never said as much. Peter was nothing but a coward, he could never make a plan on his own, it made sense that he would never hurt Harry when someone wasn't directly instructing him to do so. He could feel that that was true the moment he heard Peter speak, and his opinion never changed. If anything, in the years that came after that night, his opinion was only reaffirmed.

Hermione asked tentatively how Sirius managed to get out of Azkaban, which Peter used as an opportunity to once again accuse Sirius of using dark magic. Regulus chuckled at that, and Hermione gave him a very odd, unsettled look. He didn't bother explaining that Sirius, the

ultimate Gryffindor, the one who ran from their family's dark magic, would be the last possible person to use such a thing, even to escape the torture prison that was Azkaban. Regulus wished he had realized that earlier, he wished he'd understood that Sirius was innocent before that night.

Sirius explained that he managed to slip past the dementors because of his Animagus form. Snape watched him with a sneer, but Sirius spoke as if he'd forgotten Snape was in the room at all. Lupin looked at him with that same smitten smile as if escaping Azkaban to try and commit the murder one was originally imprisoned for was the most romantic and gallant thing a person could do. Sirius told the story directly to Harry as if only Harry's opinion mattered. Regulus didn't disagree exactly, but he found it peculiar nonetheless.

"He's at Hogwarts," Harry repeated. "That's what Mr. Weasley told me you said." Sirius looked shocked at that but nodded, explaining that he noticed Peter in the Prophet, published with a story about the Weasley family's trip to Egypt. Ron looked guilty and like he might be sick.

Sirius kept imploring Harry to believe him. "I would never betray James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them," Sirius said. Regulus did not miss the odd look Lupin gave him when Sirius said James's name, but he staunchly ignored it. He didn't care what Lupin thought. Harry seemed to finally be convinced, and Regulus could see the way his features softened, before hardening back into the look of determination that Regulus had seen so many times before.

After that Peter went on a tour of begging and pleading. "Sirius, it's me. It's Peter, your friend," he implored. Sirius only sneered at him, looking disturbingly like their father, though a deathly skinny and very dirty version of him. Regulus wasn't even sure why Peter bothered to beg Sirius. The man escaped prison just to kill him, one would think the forgiveness train had long since left the station.

"You don't believe this. Wouldn't Sirius have told you they'd changed the plan?" Peter said when he turned to Lupin. Oh, that was so devious, Regulus thought. If he didn't want the man dead so much, he might have been impressed. Trying to drive a wedge between Sirius and Lupin, he must have been very familiar with their unending love for each other. Regulus wondered if that was what Peter had done the first time. If he turned them against each other so that Sirius would be the one presumed guilty.

It didn't work, of course. Sirius and Lupin looked at each other with such forgiveness and grace. Lupin already looked so soft despite everything. Sirius, the horrifying skeletal figure that he made, looked like a man finally offered a drink of water after years of drought. They forgave each other, despite everything, despite the fact that they had apparently both believed that the other was a spy and that it had been more than a decade since they had seen each other. Forgiveness stretched farther than everything and wrapped around them like a soft blanket. Peter never stood a chance.

Peter turned to Snape next, begging him to understand. "You never trusted them. You remember what Sirius was like in school," Peter said. Snape shook Peter off from where Peter had grabbed onto the end of his cloak. He just looked mildly disgusted although there

wasn't much difference between the look Snape gave to Lupin and Sirius and the one he gave to Peter.

Peter tried to beg each of the children as well. He crawled to Ron first, reminding him of what a good and loyal pet he had been. This was without a doubt the wrong plan given the way Ron's face twisted into a horrified mask. "I let you sleep in my bed!" Ron yelled, trying to inch away from the awful man. His nails were so long after years spent as a rat and when they reached out toward Ron's face, Ron looked like he might vomit the second he was touched.

Hermione was equally horrified. "Sweet girl, clever girl," Peter whimpered and cried. Hermione took a step backward, her back hitting one of the posts of the bed though she hardly seemed to notice. It was clear that she did not appreciate the way Peter looked at her. Regulus didn't appreciate it either. He shouldn't be talking to any of them, to begin with.

"Please, Regulus," Peter said and Regulus jolted. Regulus had felt so disconnected throughout the entire performance that Peter was putting on that he'd almost forgotten that he was a real person in the room. "You know I would never hurt Harry. You've been protecting him, I've seen it. You have to know..."

Regulus had to keep himself from spitting on the man. That would be terribly unbecoming of someone like him, but he still felt the strong urge. The fact that Peter had been watching Regulus try, and ultimately fail, to keep Harry safe from harm made his skin crawl. He felt so revolted when he remembered all the conversations Peter must have overheard between Harry and Regulus. Regulus wished he had his wand so he could put an end to all of this, so he could just kill the man himself and get it over with.

Peter went to Harry last. It was a mistake, without a doubt. "You look just like your father," Peter said and that was the moment Regulus reached the end of his rope. He pulled his foot up and kicked Peter directly in the face with the bottom of his shoe. Harry jumped back slightly at the sound of Peter's nose crunching beneath Regulus's foot.

"How dare you?" Regulus practically hissed. He heard Sirius say nearly the same thing, but he wasn't paying attention. Sirius began to shout and Lupin pulled Peter away from them so that he was on his knees before Lupin and Sirius, both of them pointing a wand at the man. The carnage that remained of Peter's nose was almost hard to look at. Regulus wished he could make it worse.

Ultimately, Sirius and Lupin agreed to kill him together. It was almost comical the way they gazed into each other's eyes with love and adoration as they raised their wands to commit murder. Regulus felt a ridiculous jealousy while looking at them. He didn't think anyone had ever looked at him like that, and it was difficult knowing no one ever would. A moment before the Killing Curse could leave their wands, Harry intervened.

"You can't kill him. You can't!" Harry said, stepping forward. Nearly everyone in the room looked at him in surprise. Even Snape seemed shocked that Harry had stopped them. Really, it was bizarre that Snape hadn't done anything the entire time beyond watching the proceedings with mild curiosity and repulsion.

Still, Regulus couldn't believe Harry was stopping them. Or at least, he couldn't believe it at first, but in retrospect, it made perfect sense. Harry was very pragmatic, and if Peter was dead then that meant the truth died with him. More than that, Harry was kind in a way that few people were. Sirius and Lupin must have seen this too as they let Harry make the decision, giving him the same deference that they would have given James.

With the decision to take Peter to the dementors settled, Lupin moved forward and cast a few quick spells to tie up the man. Sirius reluctantly gave them all their wands back, though when he handed Regulus his he didn't look up, clearly avoiding his eyes. Regulus wondered what was going through his head, but now wasn't the time to ask. Snape came forward and Ron flinched so badly that his head smacked against the bed frame with a loud crack.

"Relax, boy," Snape said with a sneer before crouching next to Ron. "*Ferula*," he said, and suddenly Ron's mangled leg was wrapped in a tightly wound bandage. Ron breathed a sigh of relief, no doubt from the pain finally subsiding enough for him to relax a bit. Snape stood back up to look around the room, he looked as if he was trying to figure something out.

"Two of you should be chained to this," Sirius said, giving Peter a less-than-gentle kick. Sirius had his arms crossed tightly over his chest. He looked deeply uncomfortable and nervous for the first time since Regulus had laid eyes on him, though every time his eyes swept over Peter's tied-up frame a look of intense hatred marred his face.

"I'll do it," Regulus replied. Sirius's head snapped up to look at him. Every time he and Sirius made eye contact, it was like Sirius was seeing him for the first time. Regulus could track the appearance of surprise and realization on Sirius's face.

"Me as well," Lupin agreed. Regulus walked to Peter who was looking around with false resignation on his face. It seemed like he was trying to hide the intense fear and nervousness that he was experiencing, though he wasn't doing it very well.

They made an odd group heading down the tunnel back to the Whomping Willow. Crookshanks, whom Regulus had completely forgotten about, was leading the way. Regulus and Lupin followed close behind, Peter tied between them. Harry and Hermione had each lifted Ron, putting one of his arms over each of their shoulders so that they could practically carry him back to the castle. Sirius walked next to Harry. Snape brought up the rear, lagging behind them several steps. He hadn't said anything in a long while. It was making Regulus nervous.

Regulus kept watching Lupin out of the corner of his eye. Peter was completely silent between them, which Regulus was definitely happy about. He didn't want to hear that stupid rat talk. He thought that if he heard one more word out of him, especially if it was about James, he was going to disregard Harry's mercy plea and strangle Peter with his bare hands. Lupin, on the other side of Peter, looked like he wanted to say something, though he was just as silent as Peter. Regulus could see him looking at Regulus out of the corner of his eye every couple of steps though he never spoke.

Behind them, Regulus could hear Sirius and Harry talking quietly. Ron and Hermione said nothing but Regulus was sure that they were listening. Snape was like a vampire in the way he haunted behind them, sulking in the darkness. It was a bizarre line of people, without a

doubt. It was awkward trying to get out of the entrance to the tunnel, but Crookshanks jumped out ahead of them and managed to freeze the Whomping Willow. Lupin and Regulus had to turn sideways to pull Peter out of the tunnel, as did Hermione and Harry to pull Ron. When Snape came out they moved away just enough to make sure they were out of reach of the tree's dangerous and violent branches should they start swinging again.

"Let's head up the castle," Regulus said after they paused just long enough for Harry and Hermione to resettle Ron in their arms. They never made it up though. They were out of the tunnel for only a few minutes before the moon's light started to shine through the clouds. It must have just risen, Regulus thought, the way it was just barely over the horizon.

"Oh, no!" Hermione gasped. "He didn't take his potion tonight!" *Oh*, Regulus thought. He had forgotten. He hadn't been keeping track of the full moons, but it was clear from the light shining on them that tonight it was full. Lupin dropped his wand, and Regulus just barely had enough time to look at Snape. He looked vindicated and triumphant. It was clear he was completely aware of what tonight was and had let them all walk out together regardless. Regulus was going to kill him. How dare he knowingly put Harry in a werewolf's path?

Speaking of werewolves, he thought, turning to see Lupin who violently trembling. Sirius looked absolutely horrified. "Run," he whispered. "Run, now!" Sirius turned toward Lupin and transformed into a dog in midair, already trying to push Lupin away from their group.

In the confusion, Peter managed to shimmy the few inches he needed to grab Lupin's wand. Regulus raised his own wand to stun Peter but it was too late, Peter spun around and hit Regulus with a spell that knocked him to the ground. Regulus's chest felt like it was caving in for a second, the air whooshing from his lungs when his back hit the dirt. He wondered if the spell was meant to fully knock him out but hadn't quite done the job because his limbs felt like they were heavy, and it was difficult to move, yet he was still fully awake.

"*Expelliarmus* !" Regulus heard Harry shout and Lupin's wand went flying out of Peter's hand. It was too late though. Regulus watched in horror as Peter began to shrink, transforming before their eyes into a small brown rat.

"Get back!" Snape was yelling, but Regulus wasn't listening, too busy removing the ropes still attached to himself. "Get back to the castle!" Snape continued. Regulus glanced at him and saw that he was raising his wand, pointing in the direction of Lupin. He wondered if Snape let Lupin transform in front of them specifically so he could kill him and get away with it.

Regulus looked to where Lupin stood only a few dozen feet away from them. Though the Lupin they knew was gone now. In his place was an oversized tawny-colored wolf. Regulus could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Sirius's giant dog form was dwarfed by the wolf, though Sirius was fighting the wolf as if he could overpower it. He was barking and biting at the wolf's ankles and face trying to draw his attention away. The wolf, however, was watching all of them, his lips pulled back to reveal his sharp teeth.

Regulus finally managed to get the ropes off and stood up. He threw one quick spell at the wolf, but he could tell it didn't do anything. It didn't matter though because a moment later the wolf was howling and running off deep into the forest. Regulus glanced back just enough



to check that everyone was in one piece before making up his mind and running into the forest as well, following the path that he'd seen Peter run.

Peter had a head start, but Regulus was faster and after only a few long sprints he could see the rat's tail gliding on the forest floor ahead of him. "*Stupefy!*" he yelled, but the spell missed by just a few inches. "*Flipendo!*" he shouted. This spell missed as well, though dead leaves and dirt went flying out of the way, clearing the path, and making it easier for Peter to run.

Regulus could hear footsteps behind him, but he ignored them. He had to catch Peter, he had to. "*Bombarda!*" he yelled and fire erupted from his wand. It missed the rat's body but was enough to slow him when he was almost engulfed in flames and had to turn sharply to the right. Regulus yelled in frustration, nearly falling when he turned as well. The person behind him tried to grab his arm, but he dodged them enough to slip out of their grasp.

Peter was gaining ground and it was so dark. He felt adrenaline course through him. This was the man who had killed James. He was the reason that James would never take another breath, or ever laugh again. The hatred welled up inside of him like an immovable mountain. "*Crucio,*" he hissed, the hatred behind the spell spilling out through his wand. When it missed he followed it up with the spell he wished he had cast earlier. "*Avada Kedavra.*" A green light shot from his wand.

It didn't matter, no matter what he cast, Peter managed to scurry away, and when the last spell finally left him, Regulus slowed just enough for the person chasing him to catch up. Arms came around his chest and pulled him back. With that, Peter was lost, disappearing into the dark forest to safety.

"Let me go!" he screamed, but the arms around him only tightened.

"There is a werewolf out here." It was Snape that spoke, which shocked Regulus enough that he stopped fighting, though he remembered a second later that he was furious at the professor.

"Because of you!" He yelled and shook free of Snape's grasp. "You did this! You knew it was the full moon tonight! You were coming to bring him Wolfsbane, weren't you? You let him transform!" Snape watched him yell, but his face never changed. He did not look impressed or angry or surprised by Regulus's accusation.

"You should not have been able to cast those spells," Snape said instead, his voice dull like he was using Occlumency to hide his emotions.

"I'll show you spells I'm not supposed to be able to cast," Regulus mumbled. He thought he still had enough hatred to cast those spells on Snape. Snape surely deserved it, regardless. However, the moment he pointed his wand, Snape and Regulus were thrown apart when Lupin jumped between them, growling fiercely. There wasn't any time after that, both Snape and Regulus took off running in opposite directions from the werewolf.

Regulus ran as hard as he could, sure that at any moment he would be taken down by the rabid creature, but when he finally ran out of breath and had to stop, bent over and leaning

against a tree, he found that he was alone in the forest. Lupin must have followed Snape. Regulus viciously hoped Lupin killed Snape.

He needed to get back to the castle, and as he began walking, trying to keep his steps silent against the forest floor so as not to draw attention, he saw the oddest thing. Harry, looking disheveled and manic, sprinted through the forest, and behind him, Hermione, looking equally unkempt, ran after him with Buckbeak, the Hippogriff that Regulus was sure had been executed earlier that evening, dragging behind her.

## Chapter End Notes

rip to the people who thought peter wouldn't escape. unfortunately i need him too.

## the escape.

Regulus felt like he might be losing his mind. Where did Buckbeak come from? He was chasing after Hermione and Harry, neither of which seemed to have noticed him behind them. Regulus wondered if they had left Ron by himself. It's not like he could have walked back to the castle on his own, and Regulus knew that Snape was somewhere in the forest with them. It didn't seem like the kind of thing Harry, or especially Hermione, would do but he couldn't think of another explanation for how they were in the forest with him now.

Harry arrived at the side of the lake and skidded down onto his knees, so that he was crouched behind a bush, peering sneakily through the leaves. Regulus could see the tail end of glimmering lights extinguishing on the opposite side of the lake. Hermione stopped behind a tree, Buckbeak coming to stand beside her, knocking against her shoulder like he was trying to get her attention. Regulus stopped just a few paces away, also hidden behind a bush.

It was then that he felt them. He didn't notice before with the way he was running, his body temperature rising with exertion, but now he felt the deathly chill settling over his body. He hated the way his stomach lurched when dementors were nearby. He looked up to find that it wasn't just a few, but dozens of dementors that were crowding around the lake.

"He's dead, he's dead, my fault," he heard Sirius say. Regulus just barely remembered experiencing this before. It was the same memory he'd felt during the Quidditch game against Hufflepuff when Harry fell from his broom after being swarmed by dementors.

Regulus could hear Sirius's choked sobs. It made him feel sick to his stomach. His chest clenched painfully, and Regulus had to bend over at the waist to keep from falling over completely. It seemed weird that he might be experiencing Sirius's memory, but he couldn't figure out who else it could belong to. He could feel a painful pitch of despair covering him, a feeling that came only with intense and overwhelming grief. Who was Sirius mourning? Was it James?

He looked across the lake, taking a few deep breaths so that he would be able to stand up straight again. On the shore of the opposite side, was Harry and Hermione, as well as Sirius in his human form. *What?* Regulus thought incredulously before looking to his right. Sure enough, Hermione and Harry were still standing there watching themselves.

Regulus had gone mad, that much was clear. The dementors were crowding in quickly now and Sirius, Harry, and Hermione — the versions on the opposite side of the lake — had fully collapsed, and Regulus could see them losing their grips on the last shreds of consciousness that they had.

Sirius looked the most feeble, his thin body looked like it was barely breathing. He lay flat on the ground, unmoving. It almost looked like he was dead. Regulus didn't know what to do. He wasn't capable of casting a patronus, and he didn't know how to help his brother.

"Sirius, who's dead?" Regulus heard a woman's voice say. It took him a long moment to realize that it was Lily. One second he was in the forest and the next he was in a living room

that he didn't recognize. The intense cold still lingered, but it was disconnected now as if a problem that had been shoved into the back corner of a closet, out of sight and nearly forgotten.

"What's wrong?" James said. Regulus watched him walk into the living room, having witnessed Sirius curled up on the floor sobbing with Lily hovering over him worriedly. So it wasn't James that Sirius was mourning unless this memory was some bizarre hallucination in and of itself.

"James," Sirius croaked. His eyes were rimmed red and his lips were pulled down into a painful frown. "It's Regulus." Regulus jolted upon hearing his own name. He felt a flood of panic that he was sure didn't belong to him.

"What happened?" James asked. Sirius's face twisted and another sob forced its way out of his throat. Regulus didn't think he'd ever seen Sirius that upset, even as children Sirius was unusually good at tucking away his emotions when Regulus was in the room. Like he didn't want Regulus to have to suffer along with him.

"He's dead," Sirius finally said, his voice barely understandable with the way his body was trembling. James stared at him in horror. Regulus felt like his chest was cracking open, like someone had reached in and wrapped their fingers around his heart, just to rip it out of him.

"How?" James whispered back. Sirius didn't answer at first, but James didn't press him. He crouched down next to him. Regulus could feel the way James was working to keep control of his emotions, burying them beneath his need to take care of Sirius.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry yelled and the memory disappeared. Regulus looked over in just enough time to witness Harry — the one next to him — cast a patronus so strong that a fully formed animal leapt from his wand. A stag, Regulus realized. Prongs, Sirius and Lupin had called him. It was James's Animagus form. He was galavanting across the lake, dispersing the dementors so quickly that Regulus wondered if a few of them didn't die in the process.

Prongs came galloping back once the dementors were gone, walking up to Harry who was watching it with a face of awe. "Prongs," Harry whispered, lifting his hand as if to touch the creature.

"What did you do?" Hermione said loudly. "You said you were only going to keep a lookout!" Regulus stomped over to them. He still wasn't sure if he'd been imagining them or not, but they seemed real enough.

"I just saved all our lives," Harry said.

"What is going on here?" Regulus shouted. Harry and Hermione jumped so badly that they nearly fell over.

"Regulus!" Harry said, his voice high and squeaky. "What are you doing here?"

“What am I doing here?” Regulus said incredulously. “What are *you* doing here? Where is Ron?” Regulus asked while also vaguely gesturing over toward where the other Hermione and Harry were out cold on the opposite side of the lake. They gave each other an uneasy look.

“I think we have to tell him,” Harry said. Hermione looked unsure for a second, and Regulus was about to demand they tell him what was going on when she finally sighed with resignation.

Slowly she pulled something from the inside of her sweater. It looked like a tiny golden hourglass attached to a necklace. “Do you know what this is?”

“Just tell me,” Regulus said impatiently.

Hermione sighed again. “It’s a Time-Turner. It’s how I’ve been getting to my classes all year. It allows me to go back in time up to five hours. That over there,” she said, gesturing to their other selves, “is us from the past. We came back to try and save Sirius.”

“Okay,” Regulus said slowly, it felt like far too much information to take in all at once and he was doing his best to understand it, but his head was reeling. A Time-Turner? Hermione had been using a complicated piece of time magic to go to classes? That was the most insane thing Regulus had ever heard. Who would give a child this kind of magic?

“Harry, look it’s Snape!” Hermione gasped. Both Regulus and Harry turned to see Snape, disappointingly uninjured by Lupin, walk out of the forest and begin conjuring stretchers, lifting the limp bodies of Harry, Hermione, and Sirius onto them.

“That bastard,” Regulus growled and began stomping toward him. He was pulled back almost immediately.

“No, you can’t,” Hermione said. “I think this was supposed to happen.”

“I’m not just going to let him take Sirius,” Regulus said. Given the danger Snape had put them all in just by allowing Lupin to transform, he didn’t have high hopes that Snape would get Sirius to safety. No, he was pretty sure Snape was going to take Sirius right to the dementors.

“That’s what we’re trying to tell you,” Hermione said. “We are here trying to rescue Sirius, but we can’t be seen. We didn’t know where you were the first time. Snape said you disappeared in the forest, but no one would elaborate. They’re going to lock Sirius up in Flitwick’s office, and we’re going to rescue him.”

In the time it took Hermione to say everything, Snape had walked off, the stretchers floating behind him. Regulus could still see him in the distance, a fourth stretcher floating next to him now, no doubt carrying Ron.

“We have forty-five minutes until Dumbledore locks the door to the hospital wing,” Hermione whispered. “We should hurry up and rescue Sirius.”

Regulus relaxed enough that Harry finally let him go. There wasn't anything he could do now except go along with the plan Hermione and Harry already had. He was still having trouble wrapping his head around everything though. The fact that Hermione had been time-traveling all year was completely bewildering.

On top of that, Regulus now had to contend with the memory of his brother desperately mourning Regulus's death. If he was honest with himself, he had never expected that Sirius would have felt that way. He figured that Sirius would have felt disdain and ultimately relief that Regulus was gone. The fact that Sirius was not only upset but apparently considered Regulus's death his own fault was baffling.

Regulus didn't think he could even begin to process the feelings he'd experienced from James. It made sense, in retrospect, that the memory was James's. Regulus had only experienced his own and James's memories in the presence of dementors. But that didn't make any of James's feelings about Regulus's death make sense.

"Look! Someone is heading back out of the castle!" Hermione's voice interrupted Regulus's internal thoughts.

"Macnair! The executioner! He must be going to get the dementors! We have to go!" Harry said, his words spilling out of him so quickly that Regulus could just barely understand him.

"We can't all fit and pick up Sirius," Hermione said. "I'll stay back and wait for you near the hospital wing. Remember, you *can't* be seen. The minister is here and will be looking for us, especially after Sirius disappears."

Harry nodded seriously and the two of them climbed onto Buckbeak's back. Harry climbed up in front and Regulus wrapped his arms around him. They took off straight up into the dark sky. The wind was cold despite the time of year and it whipped through Regulus's hair so quickly that he felt like he was falling.

"Whoa!" Harry shouted, pulling backward from where he was holding onto Buckbeak's neck. They stopped moving, or stopped climbing at least, considering they were still jolting up and down several feet while Buckbeak beat his wings to remain in the air.

They moved slightly slower as they began flying by the windows in the West Tower before Harry managed to stop Buckbeak again.

"He's there!" He shouted. Regulus looked in the window to see Sirius sitting in a chair staring down at his hands that were shaking slightly. He seemed to catch the movement in the window and looked up so quickly that Regulus wondered if his neck hurt. He jumped up from the chair and tried to open the window, but it was clearly locked.

Regulus pulled out his wand. "*Alohomora*," he said and the window popped open.

"How — how — ?" Sirius said weakly, looking from Buckbeak to Harry to Regulus.

"Come on, we don't have a lot of time. The dementors are on their way," Regulus said. Sirius didn't need to be told twice. He grabbed the edge of the window with both hands and lifted

himself up out of the room. His thin frame slipped through the window easily, and he quickly flung his leg over Buckbeak's back, pulling himself so that he was sitting behind Regulus.

They flew up and away from the window immediately and landed on the top of the West Tower a moment later. Harry and Regulus slid off at once.

"You'd better go quickly," Harry said. "They'll reach Flitwick's office any minute now, and they'll know you're gone."

"What happened to the other boy? Ron?" Sirius asked.

"He's fine. He's still out of it, but he's going to be okay," Harry answered. "Quick! Go!" Sirius looked torn. He was back to only barely glancing at Regulus like he wasn't sure if Regulus was real or not.

"Go to Grimmauld," Regulus said. Sirius looked surprised before his eyebrows furrowed distastefully. "It's empty except for Kreacher. No one will find you. I'll meet you there." He gave Sirius a look that he hoped conveyed the sentence *we can talk later*, though he wasn't sure how well Sirius understood him.

Sirius finally nodded after a long, silent moment. He gave Harry one last look before wheeling Buckbeak around to face the sky and taking off. Regulus watched him as the hippogriff's wings rose higher and higher until they were covered by a cloud drifting by.

"Oh, shoot. I only have ten minutes to make it back," Harry said suddenly.

"Go," Regulus said. "I need to do something." Harry gave him an odd look but nodded and took off through a doorway. Regulus waited for a second before pulling out Harry's invisibility cloak that he'd stored in his robe earlier. He threw it over himself and started down the long journey on the small spiral stone staircase.

He passed Snape walking with Fudge on his way through the castle. "The Kiss will be performed immediately?" Snape asked. Regulus could see a small smirk on his lips as he listened to Fudge's reply. Regulus's hands clenched into fists. *Bastard*, he thought.

He walked in the opposite direction from where they were headed, moving swiftly toward the dungeons. He wondered if anyone was out looking for him. If Snape had mentioned that he had run off into the forest, then surely someone would be wondering where he was. He wondered if they would blame him for Sirius's escape.

He was glad that he knew where Snape's office was. He remembered seeing it on the Marauder's map. It wasn't the same one Slughorn had, but a much smaller version that was only a few hallways away from his classroom. The door to his office had one simple ward on it, Regulus doubted Snape thought anyone would be brash enough to break into his office while he wasn't there. Regulus undid the ward quickly, well-prepared after his months of research on the topic.

He pulled the cloak off the moment he was inside. He reinstated the ward so that Snape wouldn't notice it missing right away. Then he leaned against Snape's messy desk, waiting

patiently for the man to come back into the room. He would have to go through his office to get to his bedroom. And when he did, Regulus would be ready.

Now that he had a moment alone, he decided to take the opportunity to deal with an issue that would surely pop up the moment Sirius tried to enter Grimmauld.

“Kreacher,” he called. Kreacher popped into existence next to him instantaneously.

“Master Regulus,” he said with a low bow.

“Sirius is coming to Grimmauld. I told him to. You are not to do anything to him. I’ll be home in a week, until then just make sure he has food and that no one else gets into the house, do you understand?”

Kreacher looked very, very unhappy, but nodded his head slowly regardless. “Yes, Master Regulus.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Regulus said. “That’s all.” Kreacher gave him another unhappy frown before popping back out of existence. Regulus relaxed a bit then. As long as Sirius made it to Grimmauld without getting caught then, at least for now, he would be safe. The memory he’d experienced by the lake kept threatening to overtake his thoughts, but Regulus kept pushing it away. He had more important things to deal with tonight, and he could not afford to break down before he did them.

It didn’t take nearly as long as he thought it would for Snape to make it back to his office. Snape stormed into the room in a flurry of anger and irritation. He didn’t notice Regulus right away, which Regulus was grateful for. The moment the door was closed behind Snape, Regulus lifted his wand.

“*Expelliarmus*,” Regulus said lazily. Snape’s wand that had been tucked in his cloak pocket flew directly into Regulus’s waiting hand. Snape whirled around to look at him.

The surprise on Snape’s face only lasted for a second before it was shuttered behind thick Occlumency walls. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Give me one good reason that I shouldn’t kill you,” Regulus said calmly.

“You — ” Snape snarled.

“You let Lupin transform around those kids,” Regulus interrupted.

“You don’t include yourself in that group?” Snape snapped back. Regulus rolled his eyes.

“Let’s not play games, Severus,” Regulus said, his voice like ice. Snape looked like he was just a second away from flinching.

“Lupin shouldn’t be here to begin with. Why Dumbledore let that beast in the school as a professor — ”



“Enough,” Regulus said. “I’m not here to listen to your dissertation. You could have killed them.” The words were forced from him through clenched teeth. He could feel the dark magic itching at his fingertips. He wondered if he could cast *crucio* again. He felt like he could.

“Lupin was —”

“You know that Sirius is innocent,” Regulus interrupted. He wasn’t interested in hearing a single word out of Snape’s mouth.

Snape’s face changed, just slightly, going from his blank mask to one of vindictive hatred. It was gone in the blink of an eye, but it was enough for Regulus to catch it. “He’s hardly *innocent* .” Regulus nearly let the spell slip from his lips, he nearly cast an unforgivable on the man.

“I know you hated them in school, but we are hardly schoolchildren anymore, Severus,” Regulus spat.

“You’re one to talk,” Snape replied snarkily. Regulus wanted to hit him with a stinging hex, just enough to make the man hurt, but he was afraid that if he cast any spell, that he would kill the man by accident.

“He spent *twelve* years in Azkaban,” Regulus said. He had to work to keep his voice even, but suddenly the idea of Sirius stuck in that place, surrounded by dementors, made him feel like he might shatter into a thousand pieces. “Don’t you think that’s enough punishment?”

Snape didn’t reply right away. Instead, he stared at Regulus with an unfathomable expression.

“I doubt Lupin ever even did anything to you in school,” Regulus continued. “Besides, you were hardly an innocent little flower as a teenager yourself. They don’t deserve this and you know it.”

“Deserve?” Snape yelled, his mask finally cracking enough for Regulus to see the incredulity beneath it. “They deserve to —”

“You are a grown man,” Regulus said. “Why are you acting like a child? You think throwing a tantrum makes you in the right?” Snape looked at him with so much hatred that Regulus was almost worried that Snape might attack him.

They stared at each other in silence for a long few seconds. “I should not have allowed Lupin to transform,” Snape finally said. Regulus felt some of the tension seep out of his body. He’d had enough of staring at the man. He’d come down there to make sure that Snape would keep everything that happened in the forest to himself, but he was sure Snape wouldn’t bother to tell anyone. Snape knew who he was now, and Regulus had no doubt that Dumbledore would get an earful about it, but Regulus hardly cared about that.

He brushed past Snape and headed to the door, throwing Snape’s wand on the ground as he went. He paused right as he was about to leave. “If you ever go after Sirius again, I’ll kill

you,” Regulus said quietly. He didn’t bother to look back to see if his words had any effect. He knew that Snape understood that he would follow through.

# the understanding.

## Chapter Notes

the chapter is short cause i just needed to get from point a to point b.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus snuck back into the Gryffindor dorms after his confrontation with Snape. He knew that the others would be in the Hospital Wing all night and luckily, Neville, Seamus, and Dean were all fast asleep when he crawled into bed. He let his walls down just enough to think about the memory he'd experienced, but the night had drained him far more than he realized, and he fell asleep almost immediately.

He woke to an empty dorm. It was the last Hogsmeade visit of the year, and all his dormmates were no doubt taking advantage of the outing. It took him a long time to gather the energy to get out of bed. He felt lethargic and exhausted, his limbs heavy and difficult to lift. The sun warmed the room to the point where it was almost uncomfortable in the dorm. He found himself wondering where the others might be, so eventually pulled himself out of bed and dressed.

He walked toward the Hospital Wing slowly, or at least, he intended to. He felt like he was in a daze and when he finally looked up, he wasn't in the Hospital Wing at all, but instead in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. It was empty, of course, but there was the sound of someone moving around and listening to music in the office. Regulus entered the office slowly to find Lupin slowly packing his belongings.

"Are you leaving?" Regulus asked. Lupin startled at the sound of Regulus's voice and dropped the item he was holding, an old book that skidded across the ground.

"Regulus," Lupin said. His voice was faint and shocked. Regulus watched his face travel through an array of emotions, so quickly that Regulus could barely decipher them. Lupin opened his mouth and closed it several times like he couldn't decide what to say.

"What do you remember from last night?" Regulus prompted. Lupin looked horribly tired. The circles under his eyes were so dark that they looked as if they had been drawn on with ash.

"After forgetting to take Wolfsbane and transforming in front of a group of children, you mean?" Lupin asked, the corners of his mouth tilting down into a frown.

"No, before that," Regulus said. "I believe that was Snape's fault anyways. He wanted you to."

"I highly doubt —"

“You shouldn’t underestimate the lengths he would go to hurt you and Sirius,” Regulus interrupted.

“Right,” Lupin replied, though he did not look convinced. “Regulus,” Lupin began to say but cut himself off.

“Just ask,” Regulus said. He’d been unsure of the man all year, but now he just felt bad for him. Yes, he’d left Harry in the hands of his muggle relatives when he should have stepped up and taken care of him, but it wasn’t all his fault. It was clear he’d had a very difficult twelve years since James and Lily died. Besides, Regulus was more inclined to turn to him now knowing that Sirius was innocent and that Lupin wasn’t painfully in love with a mass murderer.

“Who are you?” Lupin asked. “I mean, how are you here? Well, I know you’re not his son. You’re the first Regulus, right?”

“The second technically,” Regulus answered with a sardonic smirk. “But yes, I’m not his son. I’m his brother.”

“I don’t understand,” Lupin said faintly, though he looked distinctively relieved upon confirmation that Sirius didn’t actually have a son and hadn’t cheated on him. He was leaning heavily on his walking stick and finally seemed to give into the pain in his legs, falling heavily into the chair behind his desk.

“It’s complicated, but I’ve been pretending to be Sirius’s son so that I could go to school here. Harry is still in danger,” Regulus answered.

“Danger from what?” Lupin asked, looking shocked.

“So many things,” Regulus muttered. “Why are you leaving?”

“Ah, well, Snape may have let it slip what I was to all of Slytherin house,” Lupin said looking deeply ashamed and embarrassed.

“He’s such a dick,” Regulus said, and to his surprise, Lupin laughed. It barreled out of him in a loud jostle of noise. Regulus couldn’t help the chuckle that he let out in reply.

“Yes, he always has been,” Lupin answered with a nod. “Though I suppose you already know that.” Regulus nodded.

“Where will you go?” Regulus asked, he felt awkward standing and gingerly took a seat across from Lupin.

“Back home for now,” Lupin replied. “I might try to — they told me that Sirius —”

“He escaped,” Regulus said. “He’s safe, as far as I know at least. You want to find him.” Lupin gave him a long, uncertain look, before finally conceding with a nod. “Have you ever been to the Black ancestral home?”

Lupin laughed again. “Of course not,” Lupin said while chuckling. “I’m pretty sure your mother would have skinned me and turned me into a rug had I tried to enter the place.”

Regulus cringed. Lupin wasn’t exactly wrong, but it wasn’t a very pleasant image nonetheless. “She’s dead,” Regulus said. “You wouldn’t have to worry about her.”

Lupin sobered immediately. He seemed to understand what Regulus was trying to say. “I see,” he mumbled.

“I think — Sirius is going to need help. I can’t imagine how he’s even well enough to speak in complete sentences after so long in Azkaban, but that doesn’t mean he’ll be okay,” Regulus said. Lupin looked for a moment like he might start crying, though he managed to get a grip on himself before the tears spilled over.

“Professor Lupin!” Harry’s voice interrupted their conversation. He came sprinting in through the office door. “I just saw Hagrid. Oh, Regulus,” Harry said, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“Just filling Lupin in,” Regulus answered. Harry gave a solemn nod before turning to Lupin.

“Hagrid said you’d resigned. It’s not true, is it? You can’t leave!” Harry seemed to gain back the momentum he entered the room with.

“I’m afraid it is,” Lupin answered. Regulus stood up and quietly left the office, giving Lupin one more loaded look before heading out. Harry deserved a moment alone with the man before he left.

Regulus was walking out of the classroom when he came across Dumbledore, who was slowly making his way toward Lupin’s office.

“Good morning, Mr. Black,” Dumbledore said. “I hope you had a restful night’s sleep.”

“You shouldn’t let Snape continue working here. He’s a terror,” Regulus said. “Honestly, outing Lupin to his entire student body. How can you allow that?”

“Professor Snape is a complicated man, that’s true,” Dumbledore responded kindly. Regulus barely kept himself from rolling his eyes.

“Sirius is innocent,” Regulus said. “I won’t allow Snape to come after him. I don’t care what the Ministry says.”

“I understand, Mr. Black,” Dumbledore replied. “I believe that I would be interested in what actually happened last night, though perhaps it’s best I don’t know.”

“Perhaps not,” Regulus said. “That’s not all. We need to talk about Horc—”

“Yes, I have discovered something but now is not the time. You and your brother require healing. I will contact you over the summer,” Dumbledore said. “Excuse me.” Regulus stepped out of his way, so that Dumbledore could walk past, heading into Lupin’s office.

Regulus was heading outside shortly after when he was accosted by a very angry Draco Malfoy.

"I demand to know what happened last night," Draco said in his haughtiest voice. Regulus rolled his eyes so hard that it hurt.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Draco," Regulus replied.

"Buckbeak escaped," Draco said angrily. They were tucked away in an alcove, but Draco's voice still echoed loudly in the corridor. Regulus laughed incredulously.

"That's what you're upset about?" Regulus replied.

"What else would I be mad about?" Draco demanded. Regulus gaped at him before helplessly laughing again. "I don't care about Sirius escaping or Lupin being a werewolf."

"But a hippogriff escaping execution? That's the hill you're preparing to die on?" Regulus asked.

"He mauled me! He nearly took my arm off! I could have died!" Draco shouted.

"Yes, only after you insulted it directly to its face after Hagrid explicitly told you not to," Regulus argued.

"Still!" Draco said. "I know you know what happened to it."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because you and Potter are always involved," Draco whispered furiously. "Your little do-gooder crew. You must have done something, intervened or something."

"You know, Harry was in real danger last night. What if Sirius Black had gotten to him?" Regulus taunted, unable to help himself in the face of Draco's tantrum.

Draco paled so quickly that Regulus worried he might pass out. "I didn't feel anything," he said.

"What?" Regulus asked.

"Nothing," Draco replied, jolted from his momentary panic. "It's not important." He left immediately after muttering the words. Regulus shook his head. He did not understand what was going on with that boy.

He found Ron and Hermione out by the lake shortly after he made it outside, sitting in the hot, summer sun. Ron waved cheerfully at him, but Hermione merely pursed her lips, giving him a long look.

"Feeling better?" Regulus asked Ron as he took a seat next to them.

“Yeah, Pomfrey fixed me right up,” Ron replied. “Good as new.” He rolled his ankle around as if to demonstrate.

“Did you hear about Lupin?” Hermione asked.

“I did,” Regulus answered. “I’m sorry to see him go. He was the only competent Defense professor we’ve had.” Hermione nodded vigorously. They sat in silence after that, enjoying the sunshine and the sounds of the lake. Harry eventually came out to join them, but he was quiet, seemingly in deep contemplation.

“I’m starved,” Ron said suddenly. “Let’s go to lunch.”

“Sounds good,” Harry agreed, jumping to his feet.

“We’ll meet you in there,” Hermione said, reaching over to hold Regulus’s arm. Regulus was immediately on his guard, but he did his best not to show it, giving Ron and Harry encouraging smiles as they walked off.

Hermione was quiet for a long time after they left, but Regulus wasn’t sure if he should prompt her or not. Eventually, she sighed. “You’re his brother, aren’t you?” she finally said.

Regulus laughed uncomfortably. “I am really not doing a good job hiding this secret, am I?” Regulus said.

Hermione, despite the serious look on her face, laughed. “I think I just notice more than most. Ron definitely doesn’t know. I don’t think Harry does, though my guess is that he does suspect something.”

“How did you realize?” he asked.

“It was a lot of things. You knew stuff that you shouldn’t have known, mostly. But also... you acted older, somehow. Like you were an adult rather than a kid,” she said with an easy shrug. “The way you watch out for Harry, it’s not like any of us do, it’s like a professor would. Almost like a parent.” She watched him closely as she said the last thing like she wanted to see how the words would land. Regulus did his best to not let them affect him. He’s not sure that he succeeded.

“Then Sirius?” he prompted.

“Then Sirius,” she said with a sigh. “He didn’t know who you were, and Lupin sounded weirdly suspicious. Then he said the thing about not naming his son Regulus and I knew. I had looked up your family tree, and I figured you had to be someone else. There are a lot of magical protections for the Black family. I don’t think you could impersonate one if you weren’t blood-related.”

“Very clever,” he replied. He still wasn’t sure how she felt about her discovery. She was holding all of her emotions close to her chest.

“Who else knows?”

“Dumbledore,” he answered automatically, then shrugged. “Luna, Draco, and Lupin as well. And Snape.”

“Malfoy knows?” she asked incredulously. Regulus couldn’t help laughing.

“Yes, he figured it out. His mother is my cousin. He had some inside knowledge. Luna’s mother was my friend in school, that’s how she knew. Although, Luna just seems to know things sometimes,” he conceded. Hermione scoffed quietly.

“Why are you here?” she asked, uncertainly.

“To protect Harry,” Regulus answered immediately. “I knew that the Dark Lord was still alive and that he would be after Harry. I wanted to try and protect him.” He shrugged helplessly. “Not sure I’m doing that good of a job,” he added, almost against his will.

“I’m glad Harry has someone looking out for him that’s not just Ron and me,” she said, her voice kind and soft. “I think you’re doing a fine job.” He looked over to see her smiling at him.

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

“You should probably tell him though,” she said after a moment. Regulus nodded. He knew he needed to, but just... not yet.

The rest of the school year flew by. The last few days were spent lounging outside and playing chess and exploding snap in the common room. Lupin had returned the Marauder’s map to Harry, so they spent a while investigating all the secret entrances now that Sirius wasn’t posing an active danger. Luna joined them more often than not. She was enthralled by the story of what happened with Sirius. When they first told her that Sirius was innocent, she wiggled happily like she’d known all along and was happy they’d finally caught up.

Harry pulled him aside to mention that Sirius wanted Harry to come live with him before Peter escaped and his plans were ruined. It was clear that Harry felt vaguely guilty about receiving the offer, but Regulus offered only congratulations. Regulus wanted nothing more than for Harry to leave his muggle relatives to live with Sirius. Regulus spent a lot of the time grappling with his own guilt over Peter’s escape.

He decidedly did not think about the memory from James. He had been operating under the assumption that James wouldn’t have even bothered to mourn Regulus after his death, and though that was a terribly sad thought, it was also comfortable and safe. It made it easier to accept his death. But now, with the knowledge of how James felt when he first heard of Regulus’s death, Regulus struggled with his own grief over James’s murder.

Every day Regulus woke up intending to tell Harry the truth, but time passed and he never built up the courage. They received their grades back, and though they all did well, Hermione decided to drop several of her courses for the next year, so she wouldn’t be so overloaded, returning the Time-Turner to McGonagall.



Sirius sent Harry a letter that arrived on the last day of term. He included a signed Hogsmeade permission slip so that Harry would finally be able to go. Regulus couldn't help the warm feeling that filled his chest upon seeing it. The letter also included a confession from Sirius that he was the one to send him the Firebolt.

"Ha! See! I told you," Hermione said.

"Yes, but he didn't jinx it, did he?" Ron replied. Hermione looked disgruntled, though there was still a quiet vindication on her face.

Sirius also gifted Ron a new pet to make up for Peter's reveal and subsequent escape. It was sweet, though Regulus could tell that Harry was worried that Regulus wasn't mentioned at all in the letter. Regulus wasn't worried though, at least not for the reasons Harry thought. He was, however, vaguely worried that he would get to Grimmauld to find Sirius missing or only for Sirius to not remember that Regulus was alive. It kept him up most nights.

He boarded the train, feeling both relieved and nervous for the summer. Harry was sulking, but Regulus already had a plan to deal with his muggle relatives that summer. He wasn't going to let any more time go by with Harry unprotected, even if it was from muggles.

## Chapter End Notes

i cant wait for the next chapter!

# the memories.

## Chapter Notes

this chapter is kind of dark so cw for mentions of child abuse, mentions of past character death, and depictions of someone recovering from twelve years of torture and starvation.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sirius was in Grimmauld Place again. He usually hated being in Grimmauld, but this specific memory comes with a warmth he almost never experiences. While it may not be considered warm by typical standards, for someone in Azkaban, it felt like paradise. Being in Grimmauld always made him nervous, though he wouldn't categorize it as the worst memories he could be forced to endure - stepping over James's cold dead body topping the list - it still meant he would have to relive through some form of torment.

The door opened to the room he's in - his bedroom, he realizes belatedly - and a young Regulus Black entered. Of course, it's Regulus. He's in Grimmauld after all, he should just be happy that it's not his mother again. The last time he could remember being in Grimmauld, he had to relive the time his mother discovered one of his muggle t-shirts in his room and had spent nearly three hours cutting up his back with dark magic. So all in all, seeing Regulus was at least a bit of a relief.

It's a little unsettling to see Regulus at this exact age though, but it's nothing compared to when he appears in his prison cell, looking like a walking skeleton, begging for his life. The first time he saw Regulus, he looked like the surly sixteen-year-old that Sirius remembered seeing at Hogwarts, that wasn't so bad, but then he remembered Regulus's untimely death and it all went downhill from there.

Even when he's in better shape, Regulus usually appears as a younger version of himself, crying after one of his mother's cruel punishments, like the time he had to relive comforting Regulus after his mother broke two of his fingers for misbehaving at dinner. It wasn't even Sirius's pain, but he felt it like it was his own. Regulus was so small then, his little fingers twisted in a way that was hard to look at and the only source of comfort that he had was Sirius, who could do little more than hold him close and shush him when his crying got too loud.

Dealing with a thirteen-year-old Regulus Black could be challenging in its own way — at least, he thought he looked thirteen, but it was difficult to tell. It had been so long. Despite not having fully outgrown his baby fat, he'd become lanky and awkward, signaling the transition toward the dead teenager he would eventually become. He looked frightened of Sirius, that was unusual, Sirius noted. Usually, Regulus displayed either anger or sadness, with no in-between. The caution in Regulus's expression made Sirius feel uneasy in a way he couldn't quite articulate.

“Sirius, you need to eat,” Regulus said. His hair was longer than Sirius had ever seen it, hanging loosely around his neck. There were dark circles under his eyes like he hadn’t been sleeping well. It reminded Sirius of the last time he saw Regulus, when Sirius was leaving Hogwarts for the last time, Regulus had looked so disassociated and disconnected. He remembered trying to catch his eye, though he wasn’t quite sure why he wanted to. However, when Regulus caught his glance, he merely scowled and turned away.

“Sirius,” Regulus said again, drawing his attention back. Sirius’s thoughts always drifted nowadays. Regulus held a tray with food on it. Sirius knew it was a trick. During his first year in Azkaban, he often experienced flashbacks of food. They weren’t the best-formed memories, but they usually had happy feelings attached to them. However, this only drew the attention of the Dementors, who were always eager to snatch away any sliver of happiness, even if it was simply a figment of his imagination. So, when a thirteen-year-old Regulus came in holding a tray of food, Sirius was quick to remind himself that it wasn’t real, that the food would bring no happiness. Regulus took a small step toward him.

“No,” Sirius mumbled. He tried to wave Regulus off, but Regulus only sighed and placed the tray on a nearby surface. He was surprised to hear his voice sounded better, it had been scratchy from screaming for a long time. He didn’t scream for the first year or so, though he grew very accustomed to hearing the other prisoners as they worked their own torment. Looking back, he believed the guilt associated with James and Lily dying overwhelmed his own need to scream. He belonged in Azkaban, whether or not he was the one to betray James.

No, he didn’t scream until he’d been there for months, well over a year if the full moons could be trusted, and the thought of Moony out all alone, believing Sirius was a spy and a murderer. He thought about Remus having to go through the full moon without anyone to care for him, to spend time with and distract the wolf, to patch up his wounds, to make him tea and dinner the next day. That was when he started screaming, and once he started, he was not sure that he ever really stopped.

“It’s happening again, isn’t it?” Regulus asked, drawing Sirius’s attention back to him. He looked so worried and stressed. Sirius vividly remembered this period in their lives, when their relationship was already strained, but they still shared moments of camaraderie. Regulus would sometimes sneak into Sirius’s room late at night to talk to him, or occasionally heal his wounds, after Sirius inevitably attracted the ire of his parents.

He wishes he could escape the memories of Regulus’s desolate face when Sirius started to turn against him. He knew that Regulus wasn’t kind to him either, that Regulus began acting like the rest of his family, but Sirius could barely remember that now. He could only remember his own mistakes. He couldn’t actually place the awful things Regulus had said to him, though he was almost certain Regulus must have done something awful, but he could recall every single time he pushed Regulus away. He wondered how responsible he was for Regulus’s death. If his memories were to be believed, then it was completely his fault. Sirius was good at that though, killing people, he’d killed James and Lily. Their deaths were his fault, so why wouldn’t Regulus’s death be his fault as well?

“I’m sorry,” Sirius said, choking on the words. He didn’t usually speak, but the guilt was so heavy. The way it crawled up his throat felt like he was being assaulted. “Please, please, forgive me.” He wondered if this Regulus would suddenly morph into one of the other versions that he usually appeared as. He desperately hoped it would not be the dead one, he didn’t think he could manage that at the moment. “I shouldn’t have left you behind,” he said. “I should have brought you with me. Maybe everything would have been different.”

“Sirius, please,” Regulus responds. “Let me take you outside, I think you’ll feel better in the fresh air.” Regulus’s voice is soft and gentle. It reminded Sirius of how he used to talk to Regulus when they were children, back when Sirius was kind and good.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Sirius babbles, he thought he might be crying, but it was hard to tell. Tears so rarely accompanied crying in Azkaban, not after months and years of dehydration. He knew how he must sound, but he can’t seem to stop himself. He had heard every individual torment of all of the other prisoners, why would he care if they heard yet another one of his? “I shouldn’t have left you behind,” he says again.

Regulus sighed deeply and looked away from Sirius for a long moment. His long hair swept to cover his face when he turned his head. It looked so strange on him, so unlike the Regulus Sirius could remember. “I deserved it,” Regulus finally said, clenching his jaw tight as he looked back to meet Sirius’s eyes.

“What?” Sirius responded, baffled.

“I deserved to be left behind,” Regulus said, staring back at Sirius with a naked expression of regret on his face. “I don’t think you can remember right now, but I deserved it. It wouldn’t have changed anything, Sirius. Even if you had dragged me away after you, it wouldn’t have changed anything.”

Sirius felt out of his depth. Regulus never said things like this, not once in all the time he’d been locked in a cell had Regulus appeared and told him that he had *deserved* to be left with their awful family. “I’m confused,” he said aloud because this memory just kept going, but he was having trouble placing the actual memory it belonged to. He wondered if his brain was fully fractured now after so long with the dementors.

“I know,” Regulus said gently. “I’ll be right back, just stay here.” Like Sirius was able to leave at all, Sirius thought. Regulus left the tray of imaginary food and swept out of the room. Sirius watched him go. He expected the walls of Grimmauld to fade as they typically did after a long memory, but they stayed firmly in place, refusing to melt away like they usually did. Sirius stared and stared and stared.

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Regulus was in over his head. He came back down to the kitchen after taking the tray of food to Sirius, his hand shook violently as he braced himself against the dining table. He hung his head, letting his hair shield him from the empty room. He took a deep breath in, then pushed it out through his teeth. Then he did it again. Then again.

It had been a week and a half since Regulus returned to Grimmauld Place. Sirius was waiting for him, pacing the hallways and checking the clock like he still knew the exact time that the

Hogwarts Express arrived in London. He found out later from Kreacher that Sirius had been doing that for four days straight without stopping to sleep or eat.

“It was real,” he said the moment he laid eyes on Regulus. He took an aborted step forward before stumbling back into the wall. It was like his body was betraying his thoughts without him even realizing it. Regulus was vaguely worried that Sirius might try to hug him at that moment, and he was disproportionately grateful that he didn’t. Mostly because Regulus and Sirius hadn’t hugged since before Sirius went to Hogwarts, but also because Sirius clearly hadn’t bathed despite being in the house for days at that point.

“Sirius, you didn’t bother to shower or change clothes?” Regulus said. “Kreacher would have gone out to get you anything you needed.” Sirius’s face twisted when he heard Kreacher’s name, but he didn’t respond. If anything, he just looked terribly lost, remaining quiet for far longer than was appropriate in any conversation. “Sirius!” Regulus shouted when Sirius’s eyes began to glaze over, losing focus and tilting off to the side.

“How are you alive?” Sirius asked. He looked like he was stuck halfway between aware and unaware. It was unnerving like watching an animal pretend to be human. It reminded Regulus of how boggarts looked when they imitated a person.

“It’s complicated. I’ll tell you,” he said, holding up his hand to stop Sirius when he opened his mouth to interrupt him. “But first, you need to bathe. Have you eaten dinner yet?” Sirius made a face like dinner might be a foreign concept to him. Regulus reckoned that was probably the case, then cringed when the thought crossed his mind. He had been doing a good job of not focusing on the awful years Sirius had endured in Azkaban and thinking about starvation was getting too close to crossing that line.

Sirius wasn’t looking at him again. His eyes had drifted off like he was trapped in his own thoughts. It took Regulus nearly half an hour to get Sirius to focus enough to drag him into a shower. At first, Regulus just shoved him into the bathroom and shut the door, but when the lights remained off and the room stayed silent, Regulus reopened it to find Sirius just standing in the center of the room staring off into the darkness.

Regulus started the shower for him after turning on the lights. He tried not to think about the way Sirius flinched when the water sprayed out, but it was impossible to miss. “Do you still remember how to take your own clothes off?” Regulus asked. He had intended the words to sound snide, but they mostly came out soft, as if he was too afraid to hear the answer. It took Sirius a long time to pull off his filthy Azkaban uniform. His fingers trembled like he was perpetually freezing, and they kept slipping on the buttons of his shirt.

Regulus stayed next to him, waiting as patiently as he could for Sirius to finally disrobe. He didn’t necessarily want to be in the room with him, but he didn’t feel like he had much of a choice. He had told Lupin that Sirius would need help, and he meant it. He had read that people in Azkaban eventually lost the ability to speak and function. He knew that Sirius would be struggling.

Once Sirius was naked, he stepped under the water before shying away from it immediately. It turned out that it was too hot for him because, despite his constant trembling, Sirius was

unable to shower in hot water without it feeling like hot needles. Regulus helped him adjust it until it was lukewarm and finally, Sirius let himself stand under the spray.

Because of Sirius's incessant pacing and lack of food, he grew weak almost immediately and had to sit only a few minutes after entering the shower. Regulus had stayed in the room with him, averting his eyes to give the man the most privacy he could manage given the circumstances. When he sat down, he curled his spindly arms around his thin legs like he was waiting for the water to drown him. Regulus felt lightheaded with pain. He hated seeing Sirius like that, so helpless and tired, so drained of the life he had once been so full of. Regulus swallowed harshly, pushing away the guilt and grief and anger that he felt, and decided to help Sirius with his hair.

It had grown out past his elbows and was heavily matted in place. Regulus wondered if Azkaban prisoners were ever given the opportunity to bathe. Regulus remembered how much pride Sirius used to take in his hair, but now it was nothing more than a black rat's nest forming on the back of his skull. He used his wand to cut off most of it, trying his best to retain the parts that were unaffected by the matting. It was a delicate process, and it took a long time, but he eventually cut most of it and began running shampoo through his remaining hair.

Sirius never spoke during the process, not a single word. He sat in complete silence, unmoving and seemingly unaffected. When the heavy matted hair was removed from his head, Sirius sighed in relief and his shoulders relaxed a little, but that was about it. Regulus had to shampoo Sirius's hair four times before the water ran clean, but he managed it eventually. His fingers were wrinkly and tender after the process, but he ignored it. He helped Sirius stand shortly after and did his best to help Sirius clean himself. It was a painful and embarrassing process, but Regulus could see the way his brother relaxed as the layers of dirt were scrubbed off.

Finally, after a ridiculous amount of time, Sirius left the shower looking much more human than he had going in. He wrapped himself in a towel that Regulus handed him, but his eyes were still distant, his body nearly catatonic in the way it only moved when Regulus instructed it to. "Kreacher," Regulus called. It was perhaps a bit shortsighted to call the house elf in the presence of Sirius because Sirius jumped so badly that he fell heavily into the bathroom wall. "Please bring Sirius a set of clean clothes. Anything that will fit him."

Kreacher popped away without saying anything and Regulus looked back to see Sirius now gazing in the mirror and running his fingers through his poorly shorn hair. It was still slightly long, though there were parts that were clearly shorter than the rest. Regulus wasn't known for his ability to cut hair, but for now, the important thing was that it was clean. Sirius was able to dress himself, thank Merlin, and they finally settled in the kitchen to eat dinner, a hearty stew that Kreacher cooked.

Sirius barely ate that night, he stared at the food like it was about to jump up and bite him, and he only managed to take a few bites. Regulus expected more questions but they didn't come. Sirius looked exhausted and worn around the edges. "Your room is mostly untouched, if you want to stay in there?" Regulus asked. Sirius didn't look at him, but he nodded like he understood.

The days after that were bizarre. Sometimes Sirius would be up before Regulus was even out of bed, moving around the house, talking to himself, yelling at his mother's portrait, shouting at Kreacher, while other days he wouldn't leave his room at all. It took Regulus only a day to realize that those days were the worst. Regulus would find Sirius sitting on his bed staring off into space, his eyes empty and distant. Sometimes he would talk to Regulus, if he specifically engaged him, but Sirius was rarely capable of remembering what Regulus was doing there.

He didn't ask about how Regulus was alive, even on the days when he walked around chattering to himself. He greeted Regulus with a polite smile and went about his business. What business was that? Regulus had no idea. It seemed to just include Sirius wandering from room to room, moving objects around, and randomly cleaning things.

A week and a half in was another one of the bad days, Sirius was staring off again, not moving or eating. He apologized again. Crying and choking on his words as he told Regulus that he shouldn't have left Regulus behind. All this culminated in Regulus's current feeling, that he was way, way in over his head. He entered the sitting room and pulled out a piece of parchment, scrabbling a quick note.

*Lupin,*

*Where are you? I thought I was clear before, but perhaps you did not understand what I was saying. You are needed at the Black Ancestral home. Now.*

*R.A.B.*

"Kreacher," he called. Kreacher had been silent and sullen since Sirius moved in, but Regulus didn't have the time or energy to deal with it. "Find Lupin and take this to him." Kreacher bowed and left immediately. Regulus fell heavily into a chair by the floo, rubbing his temples to try and disperse the headache that never seemed to fully leave him. He wondered if Lupin would even bother to come. He was sure that Lupin was in love with Sirius, but maybe that wasn't enough, maybe he would choose to stay away.

He needn't have worried because, within an hour of Regulus sending Kreacher off, Lupin came tumbling out of the floo, brushing off his cloak and setting down a packed bag next to his feet.

"Finally," Regulus said lazily.

"I'm so—"

"Save it," Regulus replied. "I need your help."

## Chapter End Notes

omg 34 chapters in and we get our first pov shift? absolute insanity

find me on tumblr if you want updates: [maladaptivewriting](https://maladaptivewriting.tumblr.com/)



# the kidnapping.

## Chapter Notes

happy summer solstice!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“The Ministry has been at my house,” Lupin said the moment he settled into a chair across from Regulus. “They were there when I arrived, and I’ve seen them sniffing around for days. I had to wait to make sure it was safe before coming here. They aren’t exactly inclined to trust a werewolf’s word when he says he doesn’t know where Sirius Black is.”

Lupin spoke the words with bitterness and a self-deprecation that Regulus was inclined to believe, but there was something else, something simmering below the surface that Lupin wasn’t saying. If Regulus had to guess, Lupin was probably grappling with the complicated feelings from just being reunited with the man he loved after spending more than a decade thinking he was a murderer. Regulus was sympathetic, but at the same time, Lupin hadn’t been the one in Azkaban and Regulus had seen firsthand what its effects were like.

Regulus watched him with a raised eyebrow, but Lupin just started back, unflinching. “Sirius isn’t doing well,” Regulus said finally after a long, tense silence. Lupin looked away and the muscles around his mouth tightened in a way that Regulus struggled to understand at first. “And there’s something else.”

Lupin looked back at him, his eyes were hollow and empty for a moment, it was a look of insurmountable grief, Regulus thought. “What else is there?”

“It’s about Harry,” Regulus answered. Lupin still had that guarded look on his face, but it seemed to soften just slightly at the mention of Harry. “His family, the muggles, I need you to go check in on them. I can’t go and make sure Harry is being treated well, and take care of Sirius and,” Regulus paused, unsure of how to finish his sentence, “deal with my other responsibilities.”

“What responsibilities are those?” Lupin asked anyway, zeroing in on what Regulus had left unsaid. “Homework for classes you’ve already completed.” Regulus genuinely could not tell if Lupin was joking or not, but he bristled all the same.

“At least I’m here,” Regulus snarked. Lupin cringed slightly. He rubbed his hands together like he was cold though it was unseasonably warm in the Grimmauld. He was hunched in on himself, dressed in the same poorly made clothing that he’d worn at Hogwarts. There were dark circles under his eyes and Regulus wondered how much sleep the man was getting. “Do you want to see him?”

“Harry?” Lupin asked without looking over.

“No,” Regulus replied. “You are going to see Harry regardless. It makes more sense for an — an adult to go.”

“Right,” Lupin said, looking hunted. “Where is Sirius then?”

“He’s in his room,” Regulus said. Lupin made to stand. “He’s not well. Azkaban — it’s not a good place, he’s doing the best that he can.”

Regulus wasn’t sure what made him feel the need to defend Sirius and his well-being to Lupin of all people, but he felt a pang in his chest when he thought of the way Sirius shivered and stared as Regulus washed and cut his hair. If it was Regulus, he wouldn’t want James to see him like that. He didn’t actually know what happened between Sirius and Lupin, though it’s clear that they have feelings for one another. He had no idea if they were ever like him and James.

Lupin looked like he might start crying at the words, but he swallowed harshly and nodded. His mouth pulled into a tight line. “Where is his room?” Regulus told him. As Lupin walked out of the room, Regulus wondered if he should have told Sirius that Lupin was coming first. It was too late though, and besides, Sirius was still having so much trouble remembering who Regulus was. At least Lupin looked the correct age, if a little older given his graying hair.

Regulus didn’t hear from either of them for two hours, and he was just beginning to grow worried, when he heard footsteps descending down the stairs.

“Hey, little brother,” Sirius said. He sounded more present than he had that morning, though he was not quite his usual manic self. He was still wearing the thick pajamas that he tended to wear most days, but he had straightened them like he was trying to look nice. Lupin came down after him, looking slightly less stressed, though the hollow sadness was still there.

“Sirius, Lupin,” Regulus greeted them.

“Can you tell me what’s going on with Harry?” Lupin said. Regulus had moved to the kitchen, feeling less alone at the empty table than he did in the sitting room. Lupin took a seat across from him and Sirius settled into the chair at the head of the table. Sirius had a vague smile on his face, it was a strange relief to see.

“What’s happening with Harry?” Sirius asked. Regulus had to keep himself from rolling his eyes. He worried about how Sirius might respond to what Regulus had to say about Harry’s living situation. Sirius wasn’t ever the kind of man who thought things through before making decisions, and Regulus highly doubted that his decision-making skills had gotten better after all the years in Azkaban.

Still, Sirius seemed aware of what was going on and at least he was sitting and talking like a normal human being. Regulus couldn’t help but wonder what Lupin had said to him in those two hours. He hated the way his stomach hurt at the thought that Lupin was the only one that could bring Sirius out of his post-Azkaban haze, rather than Regulus himself. Regulus hadn’t been that person for Sirius in decades, but he couldn’t stop the feelings of rejection that swam through him when he remembered it.

“His muggle family,” Regulus began.

“Lily’s sister?” Sirius interrupted. Regulus nodded.

“I don’t think — they aren’t the best guardians,” Regulus said vaguely. “It took me a while to figure out where they lived. I wanted Lupin to go and check-in. Just to make sure Harry is being —”

“What do you mean they aren’t the best guardians?” Lupin asked. Regulus glared at him, but Lupin seemed totally unbothered.

“They don’t like magic,” Regulus answered. “At least, that’s what Harry said. Ron and his brothers had to rescue him two summers ago because they weren’t letting Harry out of the house.”

“What?” Sirius shouted. This was exactly what Regulus was trying to avoid.

“I think it’ll raise suspicions if I go on my own, since I look like just another one of his classmates. I don’t want to risk Harry getting in trouble,” Regulus explained, he kept eye contact with Lupin only, doing his best to cut Sirius out of this conversation.

“Where do they live?” Lupin asked, his tone grave.

“Little Whinging,” Regulus and Sirius said at the same time.

“How do you know that?” Regulus asked. Sirius shrugged.

“Lily mentioned it, before she died,” he said. Regulus had forgotten Harry mentioned seeing Sirius’s animagus form near the Dursleys’ house. Of course, Sirius would know where it was.

“I’ll go,” Lupin said, standing so quickly that the chair behind him clattered to the ground. “What is the address?”

“Four Privet Drive,” Regulus said. He had finally managed to wrangle the information out of Harry. It was clear Harry didn’t want anyone to know, but Ron had insisted on sending him a letter in the muggle mail so Harry had finally given in. Regulus had thought Ron already had Harry’s address given he had been to Harry’s house, but it turned out he and his brothers had only followed their owl and had no idea where Harry actually lived.

“I’m going with you,” Sirius said, standing as well.

“No,” Regulus and Lupin spoke over each other. Regulus shot another loaded glare at Lupin. Lupin had the decency to look a little chagrin.

“Why not?” Sirius asked loudly.

“You are a wanted criminal,” Regulus answered. “And I can’t trust you not to do anything rash.”

“I was able to avoid them for an entire year,” Sirius argued.

“Sirius, I think it’s a good idea for you to stay here,” Lupin said softly. Sirius looked like he might back down but only for a moment before his face hardened.

“I’m not just going to let them mistreat my godson,” Sirius said fiercely. A look of hurt crossed Lupin’s face so quickly that Regulus would have missed it had he blinked.

“Sirius,” Regulus said, drawing his attention. “Please. I can’t — I really don’t want you to get hurt. I just —” Regulus’s words got trapped in his throat, desperation and sadness squeezing around him in a deathly grip. Sirius finally softened.

“Fine,” Sirius said. “Fine, I’ll stay.” Lupin nodded and headed out the door. Sirius watched him go with a forlorn expression.

“He’ll be back,” Regulus said. Sirius bit the inside of his cheek before looking over at Regulus.

“I know,” he said, though his voice didn’t sound quite sure. They sat in silence. Regulus wasn’t sure where to go from there. He hadn’t expected Lupin to go right away, though he had to admit that he was glad for it. The thought of Harry in his muggle family’s house being mistreated made him itchy.

“Reggie,” Sirius said with a sigh. Regulus wanted to protest the nickname, but he was also so relieved to hear Sirius address him with any semblance of sanity that he couldn’t bring himself to do it. “I really don’t understand why you’re here or how you’re alive. What happened to you?”

Regulus felt a cold sweat break out across his skin. “It’s not a very pleasant story,” he replied. Sirius shrugged as if to say, *mine isn’t either*. “Can I tell you when Lupin gets back? I figured I would just tell you both at the same time.”

Sirius looked like he might argue, but he finally nodded his head. Regulus blew out a breath through his teeth.

“Did you eat?” Regulus asked, remembering the food he’d left in Sirius’s room several hours before.

“No, wasn’t hungry,” Sirius mumbled.

“You have to eat, Sirius,” Regulus said, suddenly exasperated. “You have to eat if you’re going to get better.” The sun was just starting to set outside, the perfect time for dinner. He called Kreacher and asked him to make them something, which Kreacher begrudgingly agreed to, though he shot Sirius a nasty look before he popped away.

“That elf is going to poison me,” Sirius said matter-of-factly.

Regulus rolled his eyes at Sirius’s dramatics. “He’s not going to poison you,” he replied. “Or at least not enough to kill you.” Sirius chuckled.

They didn't speak again until there was the sound apparition from outside the house. It was much louder than it had been when Lupin left. If anything, Lupin was skilled enough not to make a single sound when he apparated, so the sound caused the hair on the back of his neck to rise immediately.

"Transform," Regulus said to Sirius quickly before getting to his feet. His thoughts were running wild. What if the Aurors had found out that Sirius was hiding here? What if they followed Lupin? They wouldn't be able to enter the house, but Regulus didn't know what they would do.

He jogged to the front door and swung it open quickly. Standing on the street, trembling slightly, was Lupin, his hand outstretched where he was holding the wrist of Harry Potter. Lupin looked like he was on the edge of feral, like he was one step away from losing himself. Harry, on the other hand, looked completely relaxed and happy.

"Hey Reg!" he shouted when Regulus walked far enough away from the house so that he could be seen. "Where did you come from?"

"Harry, what?" Regulus said. Lupin still hadn't let Harry go. His eyes were so luminescent that it made Regulus nervous. Loud barking came from behind him suddenly.

"Sirius!" Harry shouted before looking left and right like someone might hear him. Sirius, in his Animagus form, came bounding out of the house and nearly tackled Harry to the ground. Harry just barely caught himself, stepping back with one foot to keep his balance. He scratched Sirius's ears while Sirius wagged his tail violently.

"Lupin, what is going on?" Regulus demanded, though he couldn't deny how happy it made him to see Harry and Sirius reunited.

"Let's go inside," Lupin responded. His voice was grave and unnerving. Sirius stopped grinning at Harry, his dog face slipping into one of seriousness. He walked around Lupin's legs, snuffling at him worriedly.

"Right, fine," Regulus said, adjusting the wards to let Harry in. The house slid into place, and Harry released a small gasp before hurrying in the front door after Lupin, who still hadn't let go of him. Harry didn't seem to have anything with him which Regulus found odd.

"This is where you live?" Harry asked. "Is your mom here?" Regulus just barely stopped himself from cringing.

"Harry, I'm so glad you're here," Sirius said, transforming once the door was shut, thankfully distracting Harry from his question, at least for the moment.

"Me too," Harry said with a wide smile.

"Lupin," Regulus said, before nodding pointedly toward where Lupin was gripping Harry's wrist. Lupin finally dropped it. He pulled out Harry's school trunk and Hedwig's cage from his pocket, then unshrunk them.

“We’re going to need to clean out a room for Harry,” Sirius said. “You can take mine for now though.”

“Sirius,” Regulus reprimanded, he definitely felt like Sirius was getting ahead of himself. “Lupin, can I speak to you?”

Lupin did not look like he was managing his emotions very well. His eyes weren’t glowing as much anymore, but they still looked odd and inhuman. Sirius was giving him a very uneasy look, like Lupin might just spontaneously transform in the middle of their entryway. Regulus didn’t think that was a possibility, but he didn’t exactly want to test it.

Kreacher popped into existence next to them. “Dinner is served, Master Regulus,” he said before popping away.

“Sirius, take Harry into the kitchen,” Regulus said. “Lupin.” He nodded toward the sitting room, and thankfully everyone listened, though Harry shot him a few perturbed looks before following Sirius. Lupin closed the door to the sitting room slowly. His back was still to Regulus, but Regulus could see him trembling.

“Why did you bring Harry here?” Regulus asked slowly.

“They kept him in a cupboard,” Lupin responded, through gritted teeth.

“I’m sorry?” Regulus said, not sure if he had heard Lupin correctly.

“The cupboard under their stairs, it had a lock on it. They used to keep him in there,” Lupin said. He finally turned around, and Regulus had to keep himself from taking a large step back. Lupin was furious, his eyes glowing, his canines on full display. “There were locks on his room, Dudley’s second bedroom, Harry called it. They lock him in, during the summer.”

Regulus felt like he was going to be sick. “What?” he asked, mostly because he couldn’t force any more words out of his mouth.

“I could not leave him there,” Lupin said. He spoke as if Regulus was the person who placed Harry with the Dursleys. Regulus just nodded though.

“He’ll stay here,” Regulus said definitively. “I knew I shouldn’t have let him go back. I knew something was wrong.” Lupin clenched his hands into fists, he was taking deep breath after deep breath trying to get himself under control.

“Agreed,” Lupin said finally. He sounded more like himself, but now his voice was laced with an intense self-loathing that Regulus felt ill-equipped to deal with. Regulus only nodded at him and headed out toward where Sirius and Harry were sitting at the kitchen table.

Dinner that night was odd, to say the least. Sirius kept shooting him looks like he wasn’t sure how much Harry knew, and he didn’t know if Regulus was going to bring it up. Regulus felt an uncomfortable guilt swelling inside him. He should have told Harry the truth before now, but he’d been too much of a coward to face it. Now that Harry was living with them, there was no other choice but to tell him. Regulus only hoped that Harry would forgive him.

There was also the issue of Dumbledore. There was no way Harry could just go missing from the Dursleys without anyone noticing. Harry retold the story of Lupin arriving and making polite conversation with Petunia before storming around the house in a rage, packing up all of Harry's things, and apparating him away to safety. Harry was clearly elated with the way things had gone, and Regulus couldn't exactly disagree with him. He was free from the Dursleys, and Regulus intended to keep him that way.

"Where will you sleep?" Regulus asked Sirius. "If Harry is taking your room, I mean. Going to reclaim Walburga and Orion's room?"

Sirius cringed before chuckling a little. "Actually that room is already occupied."

"What do you mean?" Regulus said slowly. Lupin looked like he was trying desperately to hold in a laugh.

"Didn't you wonder what I did with Buckbeak?"

Regulus had forgotten about Buckbeak, but he supposed it made sense given his wanted status that he would be hiding out in Grimmauld along with Sirius. He had not expected Sirius to set him up on his mother's bed though. The giant hippogriff had made a nest out of the room and squawked unhappily when Regulus looked in on him. Harry found it so hilarious that he nearly choked on his spit. Lupin and Sirius laughed as well, sending each other fond looks that made Regulus feel vaguely ill.

"Whatever," Regulus mumbled to himself, shutting the door behind him as he left the room. They had plenty of guest bedrooms for Sirius and Lupin to sleep in. He almost worried about having them both in the house before Lupin excused himself to a room Sirius hadn't chosen. Sirius watched him go with sadness and regret, though he didn't argue.

Regulus went to Sirius's old bedroom, Harry's new room, shortly after seeing Buckbeak.

"Odd decorations," Harry said, his cheeks blazing red, when Regulus entered.

"Oh, right," Regulus said with a laugh. He'd forgotten about all the naked muggle women on Sirius's walls. "Sirius had quite a decoration style when he was a teenager."

"No kidding," Harry said. He still looked embarrassed, and Regulus could see that he was actively avoiding looking at the pictures. Regulus figured that they should have given him a different room, but it seemed a little late for that now.

"Listen, I wanted to talk to you, before you went to bed," Regulus said. Harry's face fell slightly and he nodded seriously. He could clearly tell from the change in tone that Regulus wasn't joking around.

"Okay," he said, taking a seat on the bed. Regulus wanted to sit next to him, but he also wanted to pace. More than that, he wanted to leave the room and never explain to Harry anything about his past and who he was.

"I'm not — I'm really — I'm — " Regulus said, placing his hand on his hips.

“It’s all right,” Harry said kindly. He had a look in his eyes like he almost knew what Regulus was about to say.

“I’m not who I say I am,” Regulus said simply. Harry nodded for him to go on. “And I’m not really thirteen.”

“Okay,” Harry said. He still sounded calm, which Regulus thought was a good sign.

“My name is Regulus Black, but I’m not Sirius’s son. I’m his brother. And I’m —” he paused to do some mental math, “twenty. I think. Give or take.” He finally looked up to see Harry watching him with raised eyebrows.

“How?” Harry asked.

“I died when I was eighteen. I came back to life shortly before we started first year, but I had been de-aged. I’m not sure how, but... I wanted to make sure you were safe. I knew the Dark Lord would be after you. So I decided to pretend to be a different Regulus so that I could infiltrate the school.”

“Wow,” Harry said. He looked surprised, but not as surprised as Regulus thought he should look.

“I was going to tell you before, but... well, there’s more,” Regulus said. Harry nodded again. His hands were sitting relaxed and open in his lap. It calmed Regulus enough that he could go on. “I wasn’t a good man in my first life. I died betraying the Dark Lord, but I wasn’t... I was a Death Eater.”

Harry gasped, but Regulus wasn’t looking at him anymore. He couldn’t bear to see the disappointment on Harry’s face.

“Who else knows?” Harry asked quietly.

“Dumbledore, Hermione, Luna,” Regulus paused on a deep breath, “and Draco.”

“Draco found out before I did?” Harry said, sounding deeply offended. Regulus cringed and nodded.

“I don’t think Hermione knows that I was one of the Dark Lord’s followers. Dumbledore probably knows, Luna I’m unsure about. Draco definitely knows.”

Harry was quiet for a long time, and Regulus wondered if he should just leave the room. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know if there was anything to say.

“You said you died while betraying him?” Harry finally asked.

“I found out one of his secrets,” Regulus answered. “He would have killed me if he realized. I was trying to... I was trying to kill him.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “That makes sense.” Regulus peaked up at him to see that Harry was looking calm and unbothered.



“You don’t seem very surprised,” Regulus said.

“I — I guess I’m not,” Harry said. “Though I wasn’t expecting this exactly. But Sirius didn’t recognize you, in the shack. Plus you’ve always seemed older. I don’t know.” Harry shrugged.

“Are you upset?” Regulus asked.

“Why would I be upset?” Harry asked looking genuinely confused.

“I just told you that I was once a Death Eater,” Regulus said. “That doesn’t bother you at all.”

“You just said that you betrayed Voldemort,” Harry said. “You’re not still a Death Eater.” He didn’t say it like a question, he spoke it like he was sure of the truth. Regulus answered him anyways.

“Of course not,” Regulus said a little too loudly. Harry shrugged again.

“Then I’m fine,” Harry said. “I’m glad you told me. Lupin mentioned that you were the one who sent him. I’m — I’m just happy to be here.” Harry looked deeply uncomfortable all of a sudden, like talking about his emotions was too much to bare.

“I’m happy you’re here too,” Regulus said softly. “I wanted you to be safe from them. It’s not fair that you should have to grow up with people who don’t treat you well.” Harry gave him a grateful, if a little awkward, smile.

“Wait,” Harry suddenly. “Does this mean that you knew my parents?”

## Chapter End Notes

follow me on tumblr if you want to see my slutty little updates: [maladaptivewriting](https://maladaptivewriting.tumblr.com/)

(they're not actually slutty, but they are updates!)

also i made a tiktok under the same username if you're interested in following me. im going to try to post there occasionally.

# the trophies.

## Chapter Notes

posting this a day early bc, as we all know, i have no self control.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took only three days for Dumbledore to figure out Harry was gone. He sent an owl to Remus, which luckily made it through the Grimmauld wards, and delivered the polite, yet stern note from the headmaster. They were all eating breakfast at the time.

“Well, Ron was really my first friend. We met on the train. Draco was there, acting like a knob as usual,” Harry was saying when Kreacher arrived.

“A letter has arrived for the wolf,” Kreacher croaked. Regulus cringed slightly at the verbiage.

“Kreacher,” Sirius said sharply. “You will not call him that.” Kreacher gave him a withering glare, before disappearing again. “I can’t believe you let him talk like that still. Or actually, I can believe that.”

Sirius was having a bad day. While Regulus could see the active improvement caused by Harry’s arrival and continued presence, Sirius was clearly still struggling. The only difference was that instead of forgetting who Regulus was and thinking that he might be another hallucination, Sirius would instead turn his anger and pain on the easiest target. Regulus didn’t blame him. It was oddly cathartic to fight with his brother after so long apart.

“It’s from Dumbledore,” Lupin said, before Regulus could snap at Sirius. Regulus glanced at Harry quickly, the smile had slipped from his face and he had paled slightly.

“I’ll speak to him,” Regulus said. “I’m not going to let him send Harry back there.”

“No,” Lupin said. “I think it would be better if I handled this. I’m the one who took Harry from the Dursleys. I’ll talk to Dumbledore.”

Regulus wanted to argue, but at the same time, he felt oddly relieved. While he was technically an adult, he had never actually had the opportunity to live his life as one. He still felt sheltered most of the time. Sirius was similar, only living an adult life for a few short years before he was sequestered off to Azkaban. Lupin was different though. He had a maturity that both Regulus and Sirius lacked. He had been living as an adult wizard for more than a decade, and though Regulus didn’t agree with his decision to stay away from Harry, he couldn’t deny that Lupin was truly an adult.

“Fine,” Regulus agreed. Harry still looked very concerned, though he kept any comments to himself.

Having Harry in the house was a huge improvement. Regulus hadn’t even realized how much stress he was holding in his body thinking about Harry spending the summer with his muggle relatives. Not to mention the improvement his presence had on Sirius’s health. There were downsides of course. The first one was Harry’s question.

“Does this mean that you knew my parents?” Harry had asked. Regulus had noticeably cringed at that. Harry’s eyebrows raised in question.

“Not well,” Regulus lied. “I never really interacted with them, but obviously we all went to the same school.”

“Were you in Gryffindor with them?” Harry asked. Regulus chuckled.

“No, Harry,” Regulus answered. “I was definitely not a Gryffindor.”

“Slytherin?” Harry’s mouth gaped open in shock. “I can’t believe it.”

“I just told you I was a Death Eater, but me being in Slytherin is what surprises you?” Regulus asked with a chuckle.

“But they’re all so awful,” Harry said firmly before a look of chagrin crossed his face. “Er, no offense.”

Regulus laughed loudly at that. “None taken.” Regulus had to take a moment to get himself under control. “They could be awful, but so could Gryffindors honestly. Peter Pettigrew was a Gryffindor and look how he turned out.”

Harry scrunched up his face. “Yeah, suppose that’s true,” he said. “Still. It’s hard to imagine you in Slytherin. Did you ask to be in Gryffindor this time around?”

“No, honestly I was surprised that the hat placed me there. I’m not sure I really embody bravery,” Regulus said.

“That’s not true,” Harry said. “I think you’d have to be pretty brave to betray Voldemort.”

“Or pretty stupid,” Regulus countered. Harry shrugged a little.

“Maybe,” Harry said with a laugh. “I’m glad you’re in Gryffindor though. I feel like we wouldn’t have been friends otherwise.”

Their conversation petered off after that, and Harry didn’t ask about Regulus’s relationship to James and Lily again, which Regulus was thankful for. It’s not like he could say *yes Harry, I actually did know your father. In fact, he took my virginity in the middle of an unused classroom*. That would just be absurd. However, there was still some lingering guilt there. There were memories Regulus had of James that Harry would never get to know, and Regulus felt bad hoarding them. Not bad enough to confess his secret relationship with James, but still.

The other bad thing about Harry being at Grimmauld was discovering the details of how Harry had been treated. He was so hungry that first night, scarfing down dinner so quickly that Regulus wondered how he didn't manage to get sick while eating. Regulus didn't even want to think about how little the Dursleys had been feeding him.

The following day though Regulus woke to find Harry in their kitchen cooking breakfast. Sirius joined them only a moment later before Regulus could speak a word.

"Good morning, Harry. I didn't know you cooked," Sirius said cheerfully. He hadn't changed clothes, but he at least looked like he'd slept.

"Oh, morning," Harry mumbled, looking a bit surprised to see them. "Yeah, I know how to cook." Harry was avoiding their eyes.

"Did you cook a lot at home?" Regulus asked carefully.

"Most mornings, yeah," Harry answered. He was still staring down at the food in front of him, his back muscles tense. Sirius shared an uncertain look with Regulus.

"You cooked most mornings?" Sirius asked. Harry shrugged and nodded at the same time. That seemed wrong to Regulus. Given how skinny Harry was when he first arrived at Hogwarts and after the summers.

"Harry," Regulus said. Harry finally turned to look at them, his face carefully blank. "Did the Dursleys make you cook for them?"

Harry shrugged one shoulder awkwardly. "I had to earn my keep," he mumbled. He looked between Regulus and Sirius as he spoke, carefully watching their reactions. Regulus tried to stay calm, not wanting to agitate Harry who already looked on edge. Sirius, on the other hand, flew off the handle right away.

It was a long morning after that. Once Regulus managed to calm Sirius and Harry down, in that order, they had to sit down and have a long conversation about how Harry did not have to do chores in Grimmauld.

"You're not allowed to do chores," Sirius said. Harry looked shocked. Regulus rolled his eyes.

"You can do whatever you want as long as it's not unsafe," Regulus corrected. "If you want to cook, then we aren't going to stop you, but you are by no means expected to do those things. Do you understand?" Harry looked like he wasn't sure if he believed them, and Regulus could see the tension he still held even days later like he expected to be sent back if he made one wrong move.

Regulus had softly mentioned to Sirius that he filled Harry in on who he was once breakfast was finished. Later that afternoon, when Harry went to his room to work on some of the school work they had been assigned for the summer, Lupin and Sirius pulled Regulus into the sitting room.

“Tell us what happened to you,” Sirius demanded. Regulus took a long deep breath. Sirius was watching him with a look of determination. Lupin merely looked curious.

“Not long after I graduated Hogwarts, the Dark Lord came to me and asked to borrow Kreacher,” Regulus said.

“Ugh, don’t call him *the Dark Lord*,” Sirius said superciliously.

“What would you have me call him, then?” Regulus snapped.

“Just call him Voldemort,” Sirius said. Regulus had gotten a lot of practice not flinching when he heard that name, but there was something about the way Sirius said it that turned his stomach.

“I’m not going to call him Vo— that,” Regulus said.

“What? Too afraid?” Sirius taunted. “I thought you were a Gryffindor this time around.”

“Sirius, please,” Lupin said tiredly.

“Yes, I am afraid of him,” Regulus snapped. “You would be an idiot not to be, though I suppose that just comes naturally to you at this point.” Sirius sneered at him.

“Regulus,” Lupin said calmly. “Why did Voldemort ask to borrow Kreacher?”

Regulus huffed waiting to see if Sirius would interrupt again, but when he stayed silent, Regulus went on. “He didn’t say at first. He just asked to borrow him. I told Kreacher to return to me the moment he was done though. However, when Kreacher returned, he was sick and half-dead.”

Sirius mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like, “Good riddance.” Regulus nearly snapped at him again before Lupin interrupted.

“What happened to him?”

“The Dark— You-Know-Who,” Regulus corrected, “took him to a cave and forced him to drink a potion known as the Drink of Despair.” Lupin cringed, but Sirius just looked confused. “It causes extreme pain and thirst, plus it makes you hallucinate, infecting your thoughts with uncontrollable fear. He made Kreacher drink this and left him there to die. However, since I told Kreacher to return to me, he made it back alive.

Regulus had to take a moment to reel in his emotions. He remembered how angry he’d felt seeing Kreacher in that state. It was torture in its own right. “Then what happened?” Lupin asked kindly.

“Kreacher told me what happened. He said that The— You-Know-Who was hiding something there, beneath the potion, a locket. It took me a while to figure out what he was hiding, but I finally realized.” Regulus paused to take a breath. “It was a Horcrux.”

“No,” Sirius breathed, his mouth dropping open.

“A what?” Lupin asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

“You don’t know what a Horcrux is?” Sirius asked curiously.

“I’ve never heard of it,” Lupin said.

“It’s an item that someone hides a piece of their soul in,” Regulus explained. “A way to extend someone’s life should they get hit with a Killing Curse or die in some other way.” Lupin looked horrified.

“How did he even manage to do that?” Lupin said quietly.

“You have to kill someone,” Regulus said. “It’s the only way to split the soul.”

“So, you went back to try and steal it?” Sirius asked. Lupin was still reeling from the new information, but Sirius was clearly thinking ahead.

“Yes, essentially,” Regulus said, swallowing harshly. “I knew that You-Know-Who couldn’t die as long as the locket existed, so I decided to steal and destroy it. However, I knew that I would likely not survive the trip.”

Sirius’s face paled slightly. “You knew you were going to die?” he asked. Regulus nodded.

“The locket was protected by the potion that had to be drunk and the cave it was hidden in was filled with inferi,” Regulus said, avoiding eye contact.

“That’s what your boggart was,” Lupin said, the sudden realization making him sound airy and disconnected.

“What was your boggart?” Sirius asked confused.

“It was water,” Lupin explained. “I didn’t understand it at first, but I thought I saw a hand come out at the last second. I had been trying to figure out what it meant. Your boggart turns into the inferi in that cave.”

“Yes,” Regulus said through gritted teeth. “Thank you, Lupin.” Lupin had the decency to look a little embarrassed. “Anyway, I knew the cave was filled with them, and I wasn’t about to make Kreacher drink that potion again, so I decided to do it myself and send Kreacher off with the locket once I’d taken it.”

“What?” Sirius said, his eyes looked far too bright all of a sudden. “You can’t do that!”

“I assure you, I can,” Regulus said. “Or I did,” he corrected. “Stop interrupting me.”

“Go on,” Lupin said. Regulus sighed.

“Well, I’m assuming you know what happened next. I went into the cave, drank the potion, and drowned after giving Kreacher the locket.” Sirius looked like he was going to be sick for a moment. “I thought — I figured it was the end, but then the next thing I knew I crawled out of the water. Kreacher apparated back in and brought me back here.”

“What? How?” Sirius asked.

“I don’t know exactly,” Regulus said. “I didn’t even realize any time had passed. It wasn’t until later that Kreacher told me I had been gone for more than a decade that I realized. More than that, I was somehow de-aged and I have no explanation for it.”

Sirius looked mildly distrustful, but Lupin just looked bewildered.

“And you decided to go to Hogwarts,” Sirius said blandly.

“When I came back, Kreacher informed me that he was unable to destroy the locket. No matter what he did, the locket couldn’t be affected by any magic.”

“So Voldemort is still alive,” Lupin said solemnly. “Even though everyone believes him to be dead.”

“Exactly,” Regulus said, nodding his head. “I knew he had to be out there somewhere and, given how famous Harry is, I knew You-Know-Who would be out for revenge.”

“Were you ever able to destroy the locket?” Sirius asked, uncertainly.

Regulus shook his head. “That’s not all,” Regulus said quietly. “The locket isn’t the only one.”

“No,” Sirius gasped. “That’s impossible.”

“Wait, what?” Lupin asked.

“More than one Horcrux,” Sirius said to Lupin. “Right, Reggie? That’s what you mean?”

“Yes, he made several,” Regulus said.

“He’s a madman,” Sirius breathed. Regulus nodded in agreement.

“Is that what you meant by your other responsibilities?” Remus asked.

“Yes, I need to find the rest. I think I might have a way to destroy the locket. Harry was able to destroy another Horcrux,” Regulus said.

“Harry was?” Sirius shouted. Regulus shushed him.

“In second year, the Chamber of Secrets was opened,” Regulus began to say.

“I’m sorry?” Sirius yelled. Lupin shouted as well, but Regulus couldn’t make out what he was saying over Sirius’s loud voice. That sidetracked them for a while. Regulus collapsed onto the couch across from where Sirius and Lupin were sitting and tried his best to recount the events of second year. It was a lot, even when it happened, but trying to explain it to an outside person made it sound even worse.

“You were possessed by Voldemort?” Sirius said loudly. He basically hadn’t stopped shouting since Regulus began to speak.

“Is everything okay?” Harry’s soft voice drifted into the room, the door cracking open as he poked his head in.

“You fought a basilisk?” Lupin said faintly. He looked vaguely ill, his skin sallow and his hands gripped tightly onto the chair beneath him. Harry cringed a little.

“Reggie, how many times have you almost died?” Sirius said. He was trembling now. Standing with his back so straight that he looked stiff and uncomfortable.

“Not that many,” Regulus said. He had a terrible headache forming behind his eyes, and he hadn’t even gotten around to explaining the basilisk fangs he had taken.

“That’s not — I’m not happy about that,” Sirius said robotically. The words seemed to fight him on the way up and the moment they were spoken, he exited the room. Harry wore an expression as if he had personally put Regulus in danger and upset Sirius. He watched Sirius go with an unhappy look.

“Harry, how is your schoolwork going?” Lupin said. That seemed to distract Harry, which Regulus was grateful for. He felt so drained and he honestly found Sirius’s response completely bizarre. He didn’t understand why he was so upset.

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Dumbledore ended up visiting them the same afternoon that Lupin received the letter. Regulus wasn’t completely happy about it, but he also felt like it was unavoidable. More than that, he knew at some point he would need to meet with Dumbledore to talk about the Horcruxes. Lupin had spent back a quick note telling him to come by and at about three in the afternoon, Dumbledore came walking out of the floo into the Grimmauld sitting room. Regulus couldn’t even imagine how his parents would feel knowing Dumbledore was in their house.

The conversation Dumbledore had with Lupin went on for a long half hour. Regulus could practically hear the strong silencing charm that Lupin had thrown up over the room the moment the door closed behind him. Sirius had his eyes glued to the silenced door, his hands were shaking slightly. Harry was incredibly anxious during it, he was sitting with Sirius and Regulus but kept frantically standing up only to sit back down again. Sirius eventually rested a firm hand on Harry’s shoulder and that seemed to calm them both down.

When Lupin finally came out of the room, he looked both angry and relieved at the same time.

“Dumbledore wants to speak to you,” he said to Regulus. Regulus nodded and headed into the room.

“Hello, Mr. Black,” Dumbledore said.

“If you are here to convince me that Harry needs to go back, then I am not interested. I am not just going to stand by and let those muggles mistreat him. He is perfectly safe and well cared for here. Besides, James and Lily would have wanted Sirius to be the one taking care of Harry.” The words spilled out of his mouth in a large jumble, and he had to stop to suck in a breath at the end.

“I have already spoken to Remus,” Dumbledore said. “I’m sure he will fill you in, but we have agreed that Harry will be safe here. As long as he stays within the wards, he will be fine. I trust all of you to watch out for him.” Regulus watched Dumbledore’s facial features closely as he spoke, trying to see if there was any crack in the calm facade that Dumbledore always wore. When he could find none, he relaxed.

“Okay, good,” Regulus said quietly.

“That is not, in fact, what I wanted to discuss with you,” Dumbledore said.

“Oh,” Regulus mumbled. “The Horcruxes?”

“Yes, I have begun to compile memories about Tom Riddle’s past in an effort to discover where he might have hidden additional Horcruxes. In my search, I came across a possible location.” Regulus looked at him surprised. This was great news. Regulus had done next to nothing with his search for the Horcruxes.

“Okay, where do you think it is?”

“It might be easier if you come back to Hogwarts with me. I can share the memory with you,” Dumbledore said. “Unless you have a pensive here?”

Regulus didn’t. Luckily it wasn’t difficult to travel to the headmaster’s office. Dumbledore had adjusted the floo system so that he could travel in and out quickly during the summer months when the need for security was lowered. It had been a long time since Regulus had used a pensive. He had only used it once or twice during his first life. It was an uncomfortable experience free falling into the memory.

The memory began with a much younger Dumbledore. His hair and beard still held their auburn color, not yet faded into gray. Regulus caught on quickly to what was happening, watching Dumbledore walk into an orphanage to speak with a Mrs. Cole about Tom Riddle’s place at Hogwarts. Mrs. Cole, it turned out, was a heavy drinker who loved to share secrets. She talked about Tom Riddle’s mother arriving at the orphanage to give birth to Tom before she died.

“He’s a funny boy,” Mrs. Cole said. Regulus wondered how much of an understatement that was. It was clear that Mrs. Cole was holding something back, though the amount of gin she drank in only a few short minutes was sure to loosen her tongue.

“Odd in what way?” Dumbledore prompted her. He spoke in the same kindly, soft manner that he does now. It caused Regulus to wonder when Dumbledore had perfected that voice or if he was just born that way.

“You’ll be taking him away, whatever?” she said, giving Dumbledore a keen look. Clearly, she wouldn’t tell him if she thought the offer to take Tom Riddle away might be rescinded.

“Whatever,” Dumbledore agreed gravely.

“He scares the other children.” Well, isn’t that a surprise, Regulus thought sardonically. She went on to detail some of the odd things that happened, things she suspected Tom was responsible for, ending with a description of a cave Tom visited and explored with two girls. “He swore they’d just gone exploring, but something happened in there.”

Regulus pulled out of the memory so quickly that he went sprawling on the floor behind him. Dumbledore stood watching him with a curious glint in his eyes.

“Curious, is it not?” Dumbledore asked. “You didn’t see the full memory, but there is something important there. He clearly enjoyed collecting trophies.” Dumbledore moved about the room, summoning a fresh cup of tea that floated over to where Regulus was sitting.

“The cave,” Regulus choked out. He lifted his trembling fingers up to grab the tea, the warmth grounded him.

“Ah,” Dumbledore said simply, and to Regulus’s surprise, sat down on the floor next to Regulus. “That one you already have?” Regulus nodded.

“There is a replica there,” Regulus explained.

“Have you destroyed it yet?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not yet,” Regulus answered. “It has some protections on it, and Horcruxes are nearly impossible to destroy, but I have a plan. Have you found anything else?”

“I haven’t, though I have some ideas. I’m trying to find more memories. It seems that they would be hidden somewhere related to his past. He wouldn’t put them somewhere random,” Dumbledore said, his voice oddly faint. It almost seemed like he was talking more to himself than to Regulus, but Regulus nodded in agreement anyways.

“The item in the cave, it’s a locket. I’m not sure about the significance though,” Regulus said.

“A locket?” Dumbledore hummed curiously. “Would it be possible for me to take a look at it?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Regulus answered quickly. “It’s been damaged, and I think anyone close to it would be in danger.” Regulus could tell that Dumbledore wanted him to explain, but Regulus wasn’t going to wait around for that. He didn’t need to recount his stupidity with the old man. “Let me know if you find anything else. I’m going to tell Sirius and Remus about the search.”

“I don’t think it wise to share this information with too many,” Dumbledore said cautiously.

“I agree, but I — I need them to know what I’m doing,” Regulus said simply. Dumbledore gave him an odd look but didn’t argue.

He went back through the floo thinking about how he needed to test the basilisk fangs on the locket. He didn’t feel comfortable doing it while Harry was in the house though. He needed to figure out a good time to try it first.

Chapter End Notes

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the dream.

About two weeks after Harry began living at Grimmauld Place, Regulus sent letters to Hermione, Ron, and Luna to let them know that Harry was with him. Hermione seemed very relieved, though she made sure to ask if Regulus had told Harry who he was yet. Luna sent them a letter that was just a piece of parchment with only her name written on it. The envelope was packed full of dried flowers that Regulus didn't recognize, but he set them aside to investigate later.

Ron sent a thrilled letter to Regulus and Harry about the possibility of going to the Quidditch World Cup. Regulus had forgotten about the World Cup. Ron had mentioned it a few times over the previous year, but there was too much to worry about to give it any thought. Though he had played Quidditch during his first life, he was never a Quidditch diehard like his brother or James had been. He enjoyed playing but wasn't much interested in following the professional leagues.

However, this presented the perfect opportunity. Regulus sent back a quick letter telling Ron that he wouldn't be able to go, but that Harry definitely should. It would be the ideal time to get Harry out of the house for a few days so that he could safely destroy the locket. Sirius looked like Christmas had come early when he heard about it. Jumping up and down excitedly before launching into a very long and detailed conversation about the various teams that he and James used to follow. Harry listened with rapt attention, but Regulus and Lupin just tuned them out.

The day after Regulus had met with Dumbledore, Sirius had another bad day. He had foolishly hoped that Harry's presence would offset some of the trauma Sirius had endured, but when Regulus was woken early in the morning by the sound of Sirius screaming at his mother's portrait, he knew it would be a long day. Sirius was banging around in the kitchen when he walked downstairs.

"Sirius, what are you doing?" Regulus said tiredly. The sun wasn't even fully up yet. He wondered if Harry and Lupin were awake. Sirius whirled around to look at him.

"NO!" he shouted. "I'm not doing this with you again."

"Sirius," Regulus said with a sigh. Sirius backed up until his lower back hit the counter.

"I'm not — just go away, okay? I don't have anything. I didn't do anything," Sirius rambled nonsensically.

"What's going on?" Lupin said cautiously, entering the kitchen behind Regulus. Sirius looked at him, and his eyes immediately went vacant and unfathomably sad.

"Oh," Sirius mumbled. Regulus was struggling to understand what could possibly be happening in his head. "Is James here too?" Regulus flinched.

“No, Sirius,” Lupin said gently. “It’s just us and Harry, remember?” Sirius shook his head. “Why don’t we go back to your room? Were you looking for something in here?”

“I saw James, but I couldn’t be sure,” Sirius said quietly. “I saw him. He asked me — he asked me why —” Sirius couldn’t seem to finish his sentence. He was avoiding looking at Regulus again. Regulus understood now. Sirius had already been dealing with hallucinations that morning, and he probably wasn’t capable of understanding Regulus’s presence at the moment. Lupin came forward and wrapped an arm around Sirius’s shoulders, leading him back to his bedroom.

“Kreacher,” Regulus called. “Will you make breakfast and bring some to Sirius?” Kreacher nodded. He didn’t look as spiteful about it as he usually did. Regulus thought he looked a little sad.

“What was the screaming about?” Harry poked his head out of his room to ask when Regulus came back up the stairs.

“Nothing to worry about,” Regulus said, though he could tell that Harry still looked concerned.

Regulus spent the day with Harry, finishing up the last of their assigned summer work. Lupin came down in the late morning. “He’s sleeping,” he said. Regulus nodded.

“Is he okay?” Harry asked, a deep frown on his lips.

“He’ll be fine,” Lupin said kindly, but Regulus could see the tight lines of tension around his eyes.

“Is he —” Harry started after Lupin left the room. He cut himself off and was clearly avoiding eye contact.

“Is he what?” Regulus prompted.

“Is it ‘cause I’m here?” Harry asked. He spoke so quietly that Regulus almost couldn’t hear him.

“Why would you think that?” Regulus said, startled. Harry shrugged a little helplessly.

“Harry, Sirius spent twelve years living with dementors. I promise you, his suffering has nothing to do with you.”

“Right, okay,” Harry muttered uncertainly.

“If anything, I think being around you gives him something to focus on,” Regulus said. “It’s a good thing, I promise.” Harry gave him a relieved look finally and Regulus felt something untighten in his chest.

Sirius felt better the next day. He and Harry spent the morning playing chess and chatting about Sirius’s time at Hogwarts.

“That was the year James came back with his hair charmed bright red. He said it was because he wanted to show house spirit,” Sirius said with a loud laugh. “But we were pretty sure it was just a miscast *Crinus Muto*. He never could get that spell right.”

“How did he manage to cast it before school started?” Harry asked curiously.

“What do you mean?” Sirius replied, tilting his head slightly.

“Well, we’re not allowed to do magic outside of school. Or was that not the case for you guys?” Harry asked. Sirius still looked mildly confused.

“The trace doesn’t really work inside a lot of pureblood homes,” Regulus explained. “The locations are so steeped in magic that it’s difficult for the Ministry to track when underage wizards use magic.”

“Wait,” Harry said, putting down the chess piece he was in the process of moving. “Does that mean I can practice magic here?”

That revelation seemed to be the only confirmation Harry needed and nearly every day after that Regulus caught Harry practicing various spells all around the house. Sirius was overjoyed, talking Harry into letting Sirius teach him how to duel. Lupin gave them a disapproving look, but it only took a day before he was also instructing Harry on how to use different spells.

“For educational purposes only,” Lupin said, but Regulus just rolled his eyes.

Watching the three of them interact made Regulus feel warm and content, as well as a little empty and mournful. There was always a piece of him that saw Harry with Lupin and Sirius and thought, “It should have been James and Lily.” They loved him so much, and it felt like such a tragedy that they didn’t get to see him like this, that they didn’t get to watch him grow and learn.

Even if it hadn’t been James and Lily. Even if it couldn’t. Even if their deaths were somehow always locked in place, unmovable and unavoidable, then it should have been Sirius and Lupin. The two people in the world that were perfectly ensconced to care for and raise Harry and they, just like James and Lily, were robbed of the opportunity.

Something cold like death swirled inside him as he watched the three of them together. While it felt like they were finally getting a second chance, there was also the glaringly obvious reality of how little Regulus fit into this family. He didn’t belong with them. The man he’d been, the boy really, in his first life, he never deserved this life. He deserved the death he got and the fact that he was offered another chance felt like robbery.

For the first time in a while, Regulus felt the grief over James’s death creep in like an insidious smog. It clung to his clothes and hair and skin, dragging around behind him and filling any space he entered. He hadn’t intended it, but he ended up avoiding everyone in the house for a full three days.

He woke up on the fourth morning and lay in bed watching the room slowly fill with light. He was just beginning his debate on whether he should spend another day rotting in bed when he heard his door crack open.

“Reggie, Reggie,” Sirius said in a mischievous voice.

“Sirius?” Regulus asked.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Sirius said, before busting his bedroom door wide open and entering with Harry and Lupin right behind him, a white cake floating next to his head.

“Oh, Merlin, no,” Regulus groaned.

Blacks never celebrated birthdays, it just wasn’t done in most old pureblood families like theirs. Regulus was pretty sure that the first birthday Sirius celebrated was when he turned thirteen during his second year. James, a big believer in celebrating birthdays, had no doubt explained the custom to Sirius. This meant that the first birthday Regulus ever celebrated was when he turned twelve the summer after his first year. Sirius and his relationship was only a little bit tense then, and Regulus distinctly remembered Sirius stealing a bunch of chocolate from the kitchen, so that he could give it to Regulus.

It was terribly embarrassing then and it was terribly embarrassing now.

“Oh, Merlin, yes,” Sirius said, back before the three of them launched into a birthday song that grated on Regulus’s eardrums. Harry was laughing wildly by the time they finished. Sirius was looking at Harry with such unconditional love that Regulus felt strangely like crying. Lupin just looked a little sheepish, giving Regulus a small apologetic smile.

“Why didn’t you tell me your birthday was the fifth?” Harry said. “I hadn’t even thought to ask.”

“Blacks don’t celebrate birthdays,” Regulus said and annoyingly, Sirius said the same thing at the same time, doing an uncomfortably good impression of their mother.

“That’s weird,” Harry said simply.

“Exactly,” Sirius agreed. They spent the day together, the four of them, eating a little too much, and when Harry eventually passed out, drinking a little too much. Regulus hadn’t even had any alcohol since he began his second life, but it was nice to sit back and let himself go a little fuzzy, it eased the grief-filled burn inside of him.

“I’m glad you’re both here,” Regulus said before immediately cringing. He hated the way his words escaped him when he was drunk.

“Me too,” Sirius replied genuinely. “Bit weird though. Never imagined that this would be what the future held.” Lupin nodded in agreement. He was much drunker than the two of them, having downed glass after glass quickly. He also kept looking at Sirius out of the corner of his eye in a way that made Regulus feel distinctly uncomfortable, like he was about to be intruding on a very private moment.

“I’m knackered,” Regulus said. “I’ll see you in the morning.” He heard them whispering quietly to each other as he went off to bed.

They celebrated Harry’s birthday at the end of the month. They weren’t able to go out into the wizarding world, but Regulus managed to order some clothing to replace the clothes he had already purchased for past birthdays. When Sirius asked about the gift, Regulus explained in a hushed voice that he didn’t think Harry’s muggle family provided very good clothing for him. Sirius had to leave the room for nearly two hours to get himself under control after that, but by dinner, he was happily talking away again.

Two days before Harry was set to travel to the Weasley’s house for the World Cup, Regulus was woken by a strange shout. He was up and out of bed before he even fully processed it, sprinting across the wall quickly and shoving open Harry’s bedroom door. He was sweaty and shivering, his hand cupped around the scar on his forehead.

“Harry? What’s going on?” Regulus said, coming down to crouch next to the bed.

“My scar, it burns,” Harry hissed. He groaned in pain, curling in on himself as if he could protect himself from the pain coming from within.

“What’s happening?” Lupin said suddenly. He had his wand held out in front of him like he was expecting an attack. Harry groaned again before Regulus could answer. “Harry?”

It took a long couple of minutes for the pain to subside enough for Harry to speak.

“I was having a dream,” Harry explained. “Or it wasn’t really a dream. It felt real.” He detailed his bizarre vision about the Dark Lord in a house with Peter Pettigrew and his snake. “They were talking about something related to the Quidditch World Cup and... Bertha Jorkins.”

“What about the Quidditch World Cup?” Regulus asked, a cold sweat breaking out against his skin.

“I — I don’t know,” Harry explained. “But Voldemort was talking about, well, me. He wants Peter Pettigrew to get me for him.”

Regulus felt like he was going to be sick. “That’s not going to happen,” Lupin practically growled.

“Of course not,” Regulus agreed. They moved down to the kitchen shortly after. Lupin’s animalistic anger was making him tetchy, and he needed them to be in a more open space. Sirius joined them the moment they walked through the door.

“What are you guys doing up so early?” he asked blearily.

“Do you remember a Bertha Jorkins?” Lupin asked, rather than responding to Sirius’s question. Sirius looked confused for a second before he seemed to remember something.

“Oh, yeah. She was a couple of years older than us, wasn’t she?” he asked, though the question seemed rhetorical. “She was such a gossip. Do you remember when she was hexed

after spreading a rumor about what's-his-name kissing that girl in the greenhouses?" Sirius said with a chuckle.

"No," Lupin responded uncertainly. "I don't remember that. How do *you* remember that?"

Sirius shrugged a little. "Guess she made an impression?"

"Don't tell me you had a crush on her," Lupin replied, though there was clear mirth in his eyes. Sirius flushed a little and gave Lupin a look that only the two of them could decipher.

"Lupin, we have more to worry about than Sirius's schoolyard crushes," Regulus interrupted. Harry was watching them with a small smile on his lips. It was a welcome sight after the pain he had just endured. His scar was clearly inflamed, so red and swollen that it looked like it could have been a fresh wound.

Regulus summoned a towel and cast a quick *aquamenti* to wet it. "Here, put this on your scar," he said. Harry gave him a grateful look before doing as he asked.

"What's it that's happening?" Sirius asked confusedly.

"We think Harry had a vision of Voldemort," Lupin answered. "Peter was with him." A look of uncontrollable rage crossed Sirius's face.

"They were talking about Bertha Jorkins and the Quidditch World Cup," Regulus explained. "They're after Harry." Sirius looked like he was about to snap, but Lupin walked across the room so that he could place a firm hand on his shoulder.

"What should we do?" Lupin asked.

"I don't know," Regulus answered. "I'm not sure if Harry should go to the World Cup, given everything."

"What?" Harry gasped, his face crestfallen.

"It's just not safe, especially if they are going to come after you there," Regulus said.

"No, that's not fair," Harry whined.

"It's such a huge event, you could get separated or attacked. I mean, who knows what could happen?"

"I'm going to be with Mr. Weasley. He'll keep me safe."

"I don't know," Regulus said, dubiously. He looked at Lupin and Sirius for help, but both of them were just watching Regulus and Harry with incredulous looks on their faces. "What?"

Sirius shook his head as if to clear it. "I think Harry should go," Sirius said while he looked up at Lupin. Lupin looked thoughtful for a moment, and Regulus noticed Harry giving Lupin an unmistakable pair of puppy-dog eyes.

“I think it’ll be okay,” he replied. “They’ll probably have a lot of security around.”

Regulus sighed. He looked back at Harry to see Harry already watching him, the same pair of puppy-dog eyes still firmly in place. “Please?”

“Okay, but please, please stay with the Weasleys. Don’t wander off, even for a second,” Regulus said exasperatedly.

“Yes,” Harry cheered. He left the room shortly after that, heading back to bed to catch a few more hours of sleep after the disturbance he’d had.

“What?” Regulus asked when he noticed Lupin and Sirius watching him.

“Nothing,” Sirius mumbled. Lupin didn’t answer though, he just kept looking at Regulus with an odd and keen look in his eyes.

Harry left the next morning. Lupin took him through the floo to the Weasleys’ house and came back only a little bit later. Sirius and Regulus were already sitting around a table in the library when he came in.

“We need to figure out where the remaining Horcruxes are,” Regulus said. They had agreed to work on the hunt for Horcruxes the moment Harry was out of the house. There was no reason to burden a kid with that kind of information, and they planned to keep that search as far away as possible.

“What about the one you stole?” Sirius asked. “It’s still in the house?”

“Yes, I was able to get the basilisk fangs. I plan to use one on the locket,” Regulus replied.

Sirius shook his head a bit. “Still can’t believe the Chamber of Secrets was real the whole time. I wish we could have added it to the map,” Sirius said to himself.

“The Horcruxes need to be destroyed beyond repair, but the magic that holds the soul fragment within them creates some sort of protection. I was only able to find a few ways to destroy them. Basilisk venom is corrosive enough to do it though.”

“You said the other one was with Lucius Malfoy?” Lupin asked. Regulus nodded. “I wonder if Voldemort gave anyone else one to hold onto.”

“Yeah, that would make sense,” Sirius said. “Was Lucius Malfoy the closest to Voldemort?” He looked to Regulus for the answer.

Regulus shrugged. “I don’t know. I was hardly in his inner circle at the time, but if I had to guess I would think Lucius was well-regarded because of his money and his access to the Ministry. I don’t think the Da — You-Know-Who really trusted anyone, so I doubt Lucius even understood what he was given.”

“Who else did he trust at the time?” Lupin asked.

“Snivellus,” Sirius answered automatically.

“That’s true,” Regulus answered. “But Snape already betrayed him, if he had something like that I feel like he might have told Dumbledore.”

“Dumbledore is a fool for trusting him enough to teach at that school,” Sirius said. Lupin gave him a disapproving look but didn’t vocally disagree.

“We shouldn’t rule it out,” Regulus conceded.

“Who else?” Lupin prompted after a moment of silence.

“I’m not sure,” Regulus answered. “If he was going by families, he would definitely choose someone from the Black family. Father was never marked though.”

“No,” Sirius said, his mouth falling open a little. “But Bellatrix was,” he said the words with a gasp. “That’s it! She was always talking about her *Dark Lord* in Azkaban. Ranting and raving about him coming back. She has to have one.”

“Of course,” Regulus breathed. “But where would it be now? Lestrangle Manor?”

“Doubt it. I’m pretty sure that was raided after they were all arrested. We could probably check though. I doubt anyone is there,” said Lupin.

“Where else would it be other than the Manor?” Sirius pondered.

“I think I know, but it’s not good,” Regulus muttered. Sirius and Lupin looked at him expectantly. “The Lestrangle Vault at Gringotts.”

Sirius’s eyes widened in shock. “How are we going to get into a vault?” Sirius asked. Regulus shrugged.

“I have no idea.” He stood and began pacing back and forth.

“For now, at least we can destroy one of them,” Lupin said. “In the meantime, I think we should tell Dumbledore. He might have an idea of how to… break into Gringotts.” Sirius laughed humorously.

“So, how do we destroy the Horcrux we have?” Sirius asked.

“There is no we,” Regulus said. “It’s not safe for anyone else to go in there. I will do it.”

“What exactly did you do to it?” Sirius demanded.

“It’s not important,” Regulus said, but upon seeing that Sirius wasn’t backing down he elaborated. “It was this old spell I found in a book, I thought it might separate the soul fragment from the item. It didn’t work.”

“Can I have a look at the spell?” Lupin asked, his voice suspiciously polite.

“No you may not,” Regulus replied. Sirius gave him a suspicious look and Regulus was sure this wasn’t the last he would hear of it.

They worked late into the afternoon, going over Regulus's previous research and exploring what they already knew. He already felt an odd relief knowing the location of at least one other Horcrux. He could only hope his brother's presence would help him figure it out faster. He refused to acknowledge the part of himself that felt oddly relieved to have Sirius around helping him. They had never worked together before, and Regulus was sure this alliance wouldn't last forever.

Lupin agreed to talk to Dumbledore on their behalf the next morning while Sirius began going over the notes Regulus had taken two summers before. Regulus was glad that he hadn't included all his notes on the Norse ritual with the rest of it. He was, for the most part, embarrassed about his choice to use the ritual after very little research. But more than that, there was a part of him that felt protective over it, like sharing it would ruin something.

"Kreacher," Regulus called. It was still early. Kreacher had stopped serving breakfast first thing in the morning, opting to wait until it was specifically requested after the summer destroyed Grimmauld's inhabitants' sleep schedules.

"Master Regulus," Kreacher greeted.

"I need you to go and watch over Harry today. If anything happens, come back and get me, Sirius, or Lupin," Regulus said. Kreacher nodded. It had been the oddest thing, but Kreacher seemed to have warmed up to Harry over the course of the last few weeks. While he still vehemently hated Sirius and Lupin, he seemed to always give Harry the best food at breakfast and dinner. Regulus didn't understand it, but he couldn't deny that he found it endearing.

With Harry's safety taken care of for the time being, Regulus finally made his way to his bedroom to pull out a basilisk fang. He wore dragon-hide gloves, but he could only hope that the venom wouldn't get through the hide and injure him. It was a dangerous game he was playing but there was no possible way he was letting Sirius and Lupin into the room with him. In the past, he had insisted on Kreacher waiting to rescue him when he went in the room, but he felt positive that the fang would work this time. However, he didn't know how the Horcrux would react, and he didn't want any magical backlash from the locket to injure anyone, especially Kreacher.

With that, he finally made it back to the parlor and slowly opened the door.

the locket.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The last time Regulus had entered the study to inspect the locket, he had immediately felt its effects. It was like being crushed under an unfathomable amount of weight. He remembered crashing to the floor before losing consciousness. When he entered the room this time, it was like nothing was wrong. It felt like any other room in the house.

He worried that the locket might be gone, but no, it was exactly where Regulus had left it, in the middle of the room, laying on the floor. He couldn't even hear the ringing that he used to hear. There was simply no effect at all. It might as well have been any regular locket, left on the floor like a piece of garbage. Regulus wondered if perhaps the Norse spell he had cast had begun to wear off. This was a good thing, he thought, although he wondered if the ringing sound might have come in handy in the future when looking for more Horcruxes.

Regulus still approached it slowly, despite its benign appearance, tiptoeing forward like he was sneaking up on a wild animal. Nothing outwardly changed though. With every step he took, however, his anxiety crawled higher and higher, but still, nothing happened. He dropped to his knees before the locket, basilisk fang grasped firmly in his hand. He was surprised they didn't shake.

He paused for a moment, consumed with the knowledge of what he was about to do and overwhelmed by the magnitude of it. Regardless of the fact that another Horcrux had already been destroyed, it felt monumental and terribly dangerous that he was about to destroy another one. He wondered if the Dark Lord, wherever he may be at the moment, would be able to feel it when it was destroyed.

It made him think of Harry's vision, of the Dark Lord sequestered away with Peter Pettigrew, planning to capture Harry, always Harry. He knew it would be incredibly dangerous if the Dark Lord discovered his Horcrux hunt, it might even mean that they would never find them, that the Dark Lord would collect them and make them impossible to locate, but on the other hand, he desperately wished that the Dark Lord would feel it. A vindictive part of himself wanted the Dark Lord to know someone was coming for him, to know that his days were numbered.

It felt like he had been approaching this moment his entire life as if every step and misstep he took in his first life was leading him to the locket. The object he had died to steal was finally going to be destroyed. It was all so much, he felt like he needed to really take it in. He couldn't help but feel a little dramatic though. *Get on with it*, he thought to himself with a shake of his head.

He brought the fang above him, grasping it between his two gloved hands, and brought it down as fast and as hard as he could. He had hoped that it would cut right through any protections the locket had, that it would destroy it the moment he brought it down, but of course, that didn't happen.

He could feel magic pushing against him, holding his hands just a little bit above the locket. The magic couldn't be seen, but he still felt like it was visible somehow. He felt like he could just make out the place where the protective magic was parting, dissolving below the corrosive effects of the venom. He was so close, just a few more centimeters and it would penetrate the front of the locket, and the soul fragment would be gone.

He felt the magic give way beneath him, and he pushed out a breath through his gritted teeth. Finally, he thought. It's gone. It has to be.

One moment, he was kneeling over it, and the next moment he was flat against the opposite wall. His back and head aching from where he had slammed into the wood. He dropped the fang and could only watch as it rolled out of reach. He couldn't lift his arms, it felt like they were glued down like some force was holding him there.

He blinked and the room was back to normal, no force, no weight, just an empty study. He was standing in the center of the room now. Everything was normal. It was normal. Right? He turned in a full circle to take in the room. Everything was where it was supposed to be, but then why did it feel wrong? He looked down and gasped. The locket was gone.

"Oh, you're back," a faint voice said behind him. He would recognize that voice anywhere, but he wasn't sure he had ever heard it sound so sad.

"James?" he said, turning slowly. James was now standing against the door, leaning casually against the wood, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Has it been a long time? It feels like it's been a while," James said. He looked distracted, almost like he was looking through Regulus rather than really seeing him. Regulus took an aborted step closer. James had been so tactile the last time he'd been here, running his fingers along Regulus's scalp and through his hair, but now, he seemed so far away.

"James," Regulus breathed. He couldn't seem to make himself say anything beyond his name. James finally looked at him, really looked at him. One second James was across the room and the next he was directly in front of him, his strong arms wrapped around Regulus. Regulus sank into him.

Regulus felt taller. He had never noticed before, but he wasn't a fourteen-year-old here. He was an adult. How strange. He let it go. For the moment, all that mattered was that James was here, he was with him, his arms firm and warm.

"I miss you so much," Regulus said. He choked on the words, a sob crawling out of him at the same time.

"I know," James said, rubbing Regulus's back as he spoke. Regulus stayed there, comforted for the first time in a while. He let himself relax, his eyes sinking closed as he rested his head against James's shoulder, his face tucked into his neck.

Something was wrong though, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. It was when he moved his face a little, when his nose rubbed against James's skin, that he realized. James didn't have a smell. This was distinctly odd because James's scent had always been one of

Regulus's favorite things about the man. He wasn't even sure that he could name it exactly, but it was almost like a mixture of the woods and mint leaves. But now, there was nothing.

Regulus pulled back a little. James looked down at him with a sad smile. "You're not really here, are you?"

"I'm not sure exactly," James replied with an apologetic shrug. "I keep getting stuck places."

Regulus gave him a long look before something occurred to him. "Why didn't you tell me about Peter?"

"Peter?" James said, looking shocked. "What about him?"

"That he was the one who betrayed you, that he was a Death Eater," Regulus said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, Peter," James said regretfully, like the loss of Peter's friendship was some great tragedy and not the direct result of that evil man's choices. "He was always complicated."

"Complicated?" Regulus demanded, pulling away so that James was forced to drop his arms. He didn't look very happy about it. "He's the reason you're dead. He betrayed you to the Dark Lord. He's the reason that Sirius —"

James tilted his head. "What about Sirius?"

"How can you not know? I thought — I thought you knew everything I knew. I don't understand how any of this works. Are you some kind of ghost? Are you just a figment of my imagination?" Regulus was full-on shouting now.

"I don't know," James said. He was still perfectly calm. "I'm sorry, Reg. I'm sorry."

"Don't call me, Reg," Regulus spat, though he regretted it immediately when James's calm face fell into one of hurt. "Sirius spent twelve years in prison because of your *friend* Peter."

"He what?" James asked faintly.

"Peter's the reason that Harry grew up in a house full of people who kept him locked in a cupboard. It's all his fault. He isn't complicated. He's a monster," Regulus said furiously.

"Sirius didn't do anything wrong," James said. "Why was he in Azkaban?"

"Because Peter framed him," Regulus replied. "He's had his entire adult life stolen from him because of that stupid rat."

"Oh, Sirius," James said regretfully.

"And another thing," Regulus said, the word rat reminding him of another bone he had to pick. "You're an animagus?"

James looked shocked. "Did Sirius tell you that?"

“He didn’t have to,” Regulus said. “I watched him drag a kid down the passageway under the Whomping Willow trying to get to Peter.”

“This is so confusing,” James admitted.

“Ugh,” Regulus growled in frustration. “Peter was hiding out as Ron Weasley’s pet. Harry was in danger for three straight years, and I had no idea because you never bothered to tell me about your stupid secret ability.”

“Er, well, it wasn’t just my secret to tell,” James said.

“I don’t care!” Regulus shouted. “I wish — I know I didn’t deserve it, but I wish you would have trusted me.” Regulus immediately regretted saying that.

James looked crestfallen. “I’m s— ”

“Just don’t,” Regulus said, throwing his hand up to stop James from speaking. “I shouldn’t have said that.” James gave him a long silent look.

“Where is Sirius now?” James asked with fake casualness.

“Of course, that’s what you’re worried about,” Regulus muttered. “He’s with me at Grimmauld. Don’t worry, Lupin is here taking care of him.”

“Oh, that’s good,” James said with a funny little smile on his lips. “How are they? Are they, you know?”

“Together?” Regulus said, filling in the blank.

“You know about that?” James asked, his mouth hanging open a little bit. Regulus rolled his eyes.

“Lupin wasn’t exactly subtle,” Regulus mumbled. “But I’m not sure if they’re really... things are different now. Sirius still has a long way to go I think. I don’t know. I don’t really care either way,” he said honestly.

“Lily was always jealous of them,” James said quietly. Regulus’s eyes snapped to James’s so quickly that it almost injured him. James looked away, his face a little guilty.

Right,” Regulus replied, a sharp pain blooming in his chest. “I’d like to leave now. Is this a dream? Can I just wake up?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my animagus form,” James said. “I’m not sure if I would make a different decision now, but I’m sorry I hurt you either way.”

Regulus sighed. “You don’t owe me an apology, James,” Regulus admitted. “Whatever you did to me? I deserved it.”

James’s mouth gaped open. “How can you even say that?” he said.

Regulus blinked and the weight holding him to the wall was back. James was gone, but for once, that was a relief. The locket was still stuck to the ground in the center of the room, and Regulus needed to get to it. The locket, he noticed, had the beginnings of a dint on its face, but it wasn't enough to destroy it. The soul fragment must have still been intact, that was the only explanation for the effects he was feeling on his body.

He shimmed down the wall until he could drop to his knees on the floor. It took a while, and he could feel the exertion draining him as he went, but he had to keep going. There was no other choice. He dropped all the way to the floor, his chest hitting the ground with a loud thunk. The fang had rolled just out of reach, so he began dragging himself toward it.

When his gloved fingers finally wrapped around the fang, he breathed out a sigh of relief. He was panting heavily from the strain. He desperately wanted to succumb to the exhaustion rattling through his body, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't give in. He had failed so many times before and he wasn't going to give up now.

It was when he turned his full attention to the locket that things shifted. Though the locket was clearly fighting back, pushing him away, and draining him of all his energy, it clearly hadn't given its all yet. Thick black smoke started gushing from the locket, swarming up to the ceiling like a tornado.

"You're too late," James said. Regulus hadn't noticed him in the room. He looked around as best he could from his place on the ground, but he couldn't see him. "You had your chance to destroy this years ago and you blew it."

"What?" Regulus breathed. He looked back at the locket, finally finding James. He stood in the center of the smog, towering over Regulus like an angry god.

"If you had been better, if you hadn't died trying to steal the locket, maybe I wouldn't have paid the price," James said. He spoke in a dull, empty voice, his eyes hollowed out with cruelty. Regulus choked on a breath. "I was murdered because you weren't good enough."

"I know," Regulus whispered. "I'm sorry."

"Do you think I care that you're sorry?" James said. Regulus couldn't understand why James was saying all these things, but there was a part of him that knew he deserved to hear them. It was almost satisfying to hear James say the words he had been carving into himself for years. "I died because of you. *Lily* died because of you."

"Please," Regulus said. He didn't want to hear it anymore, and he *definitely* didn't want to hear about Lily.

"Do you know how I felt when I found out you died?" James asked suddenly. Regulus shook his head. "Relieved." Regulus felt like he might vomit. "Not a day went by that I didn't regret being with you."

Hopelessness spread through Regulus like a deadly disease. He wasn't surprised. He knew that James regretted dating him. He had known that for years. James had never outright said it, but he didn't have to. Regulus understood.

“I never wanted you,” James snarled. “You were my biggest mistake.”

He couldn't stop picturing the way James had looked at Lily when they finally began dating. There was so much love there, so much easy happiness. When James was with Regulus, he always looked like he was in pain, as if spending time with Regulus was torture. He never looked like that with Lily. With Lily by his side, he looked relaxed and happy and so deeply in love that nothing else mattered.

Regulus had wanted that love so badly, but he knew he didn't deserve it.

“Don't listen,” James said as gentle fingers touched Regulus's cheek. His voice was soft now, tender. “It's not me.”

“No one could ever want you,” James said coldly.

“You have to destroy it,” James said, the soft voice speaking over the cruel one. “Just a little farther.”

Regulus didn't understand what was going on. His vision was blurred from tears, and he could barely make out the room around him beyond vague shapes and colors. Still, the soft words from James made him push on. It didn't matter that James hated him, it didn't change anything, he already knew.

Instead, Regulus thought of Harry. The kind and gentle boy who had spent years being neglected by the people who were meant to love him, who finally had a chance at a family with Sirius and Lupin. James might have hated him, but James was dead and there was nothing Regulus could do about that. Harry, however, was alive and he deserved safety. Regulus dragged his body forward.

“That's it,” James said, his voice elated. The cruel James was saying something else, but every time he spoke, the kind James would talk over him, speaking directly into Regulus's ear. “You're so close now.”

Regulus's body ached. His arms hurt so badly that he wished he could simply remove them from his body to escape the torment. His chest felt torn up from where he had been dragging it along the ground. His hips and legs felt bruised and damaged. He wondered if he would die again, if this Horcrux would kill him.

He was almost there, the locket just barely out of reach, but he was so, so tired.

“You're pathetic,” James growled. “You should have stayed dead.”

“That's enough from you, I think,” James replied. He stepped out from where he must have been kneeling next to Regulus. He looked normal, Regulus realized. He hadn't noticed how uncanny the James in the smog looked until he saw the other James next to him. “I think if I just...” James trailed off, stepping into the smog and disappearing from sight.

“No,” Regulus choked out.

Regulus reached forward, he just needed to be a little closer. As if on cue, James's long fingers emerged from the smog once again and touched the locket, pushing it slowly toward Regulus. It was finally close enough.

"Destroy it," James said. He still sounded gentle, but there was a little urgency there now. "You can do it."

Regulus lifted the fang up as far as he could and brought it down onto the already damaged locket. He felt the metal crack beneath his weapon and heard screaming. It was a horrific noise, so loud that Regulus wondered if his ears would begin to bleed. The smoke swirled around the room in a violent storm.

It consumed Regulus. He was drowning all over again, choking and sputtering as the smog covered him. He thought he might be screaming, but he couldn't be sure.

"Oh..." James said, his voice growing faint. "I see Sirius now."

"REMUS!" Sirius was screaming. Regulus felt like his head was about to crack open, there was so much pressure behind his eyes.

"Floo Madam Pomfrey," Regulus heard Lupin say.

Regulus was a soul without a body. He couldn't lift his arms or open his eyes or turn his head. He couldn't even feel anything, no pain or exhaustion or cold. He simply drifted listening to Sirius and Lupin speak, their voices growing fainter and more garbled by the second. He almost felt peaceful, it was just that tiny little knot of jealousy unfurling in his stomach — James saying Lily's name over and over and over.

Chapter End Notes

another horcrux bites the dust!!
next up: fourth year!

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the wards.

Chapter Notes

cw: grief, mentions of self-harm, body image issues, blood, a pretty graphic description of someone suffocating to death (it's just imagined, but it could be considered disturbing)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the time Sirius figured out something was wrong, there were already two foreign wards thrown up around the room, so thick and impenetrable that he wasn't able to tear them down. He had noticed wards around his father's study only a few days after arriving at Grimmauld. They were unusually made as if sown with anger and desperation.

He had never encountered anything like them before, though he could feel right away that it was laced through with Regulus's magic. Sirius had grown sensitive to magic since becoming an Animagus, and it was especially easy for him to pick out the magical signatures of his blood relatives. He had asked Regulus about them on one of his good days but it took a while to get the truth out of him.

"It's the Horcrux," Regulus said, pointedly avoiding eye contact. "The one I stole."

Sirius hadn't been doing particularly well since he arrived at Grimmauld, but no day was worse than the one where Regulus told him how he died. Sirius had been living with guilt over his brother's death as a constant companion for nearly fifteen years. It was already bad before Azkaban, but it became a favorite of the dementors. He had been forced to relive every single moment when he could have reached out to Regulus, could have tried harder to save him, to connect with him. He had to relive all the times he failed to do so. The guilt was eating him alive.

Now, his brother was somehow miraculously alive. He looked like a teenager for some reason that none of them could figure out and he was spending all of his time with James's son, that had been bizarre to think about, but he was alive. Not only that, but he was letting Sirius near him, he wasn't sneering — usually, that is — and he was telling Sirius things, including him in his plans and taking care of Sirius on his bad days.

Sirius, for the first time in more than a decade, felt some of the rotten regret and pain ease in his chest, but with that removed came the bitter annoyance he always felt with Regulus. However, he at least knew how to deal with that feeling, he had dealt with it for years, but the new worry that accompanied it made it much more difficult to swallow. The worry regarding Regulus's continued safety consumed him like a gaping wound.

When Regulus offhandedly mentioned the fact that he had been possessed by Voldemort and nearly had his life and magic drained from him, Sirius nearly ripped his fingernails out. He was shaking so badly, that he had to leave the room to keep from losing it. Regulus just watched him with a bewildered expression, clearly not expecting Sirius's reaction. Sirius hadn't been expecting it either if he was honest.

The only person who seemed unsurprised by this turn of events was Remus. Remus, who Sirius was trying very hard not to think about. He had been so happy when Remus finally learned that Sirius was innocent, but with that came the knowledge that Sirius had once lied to Remus because he worried Remus might be a Death Eater spy. Sirius wasn't sure Remus would ever forgive him for that. They hadn't talked about it, they hadn't talked about anything actually, but Sirius was sure it was weighing on the man.

It's not that Sirius thought they would just pick up where they left off, so much time and suffering had separated them, but he had felt a spark of hope that first night in the shack, when Remus had looked at him with love, forgiveness, and relief. He thought there might be a chance. Sirius had always been a fool though. It took only a few weeks into the summer for him to realize that Remus could never feel that way about him again.

Though Remus was there at Grimmauld, working with Regulus, stealing Harry from his awful relatives, and taking care of Sirius when his grip on reality started to slip, he was distant. He kept Sirius at arm's length, giving him worried, soft looks like they were still something other than a tragic story, but never coming close enough to the decomposing life Sirius lived to mean anything.

Sirius nearly laughed at the fact that even after all the suffering he had endured, knowing Remus had moved on from him was somehow the worst of all of it. It wasn't like he spent all those years in Azkaban thinking Remus still loved him, he wasn't that naive, but he had stupidly thought that after Remus learned the truth that some of those feelings might spark up again.

But Sirius could see the way Remus was quick to look away, the way he avoided being alone with Sirius, until Sirius was too unwell to function on his own, the way he never lingered anymore like he had years ago. Sirius felt like he was mourning Remus all over again.

At the same time though, he understood why Remus didn't want him. Azkaban had wrecked his body. Years of starvation and lack of bathing and general care had left him scarred and boney, with sagging skin in odd places and teeth that might never recover. It was horrifying to perceive. Sirius had to work to stay away from any mirrors in the house. The thought that Remus, a man who had grown into his thirties aging like a fine wine, would want someone like Sirius was laughable.

Not that Sirius could ever laugh about it, not anything more than a bitter snicker that he offered himself while he viciously scratched and tore at the parts of his body that he hated. It was just another thing Sirius had to mourn, another thing offered as payment for his stupidity. He had made so many mistakes, sometimes it felt like he was drowning in them.

Things improved with Harry around. Harry was like a golden light brightening every room he walked into. He looked so much like James that Sirius sometimes had to do a double take to

remember who he was talking to, but the moment Harry opened his mouth it was unmistakable who it was. He was so much himself, though he had Lily's pragmatic kindness. He was snarky and funny, though a little reserved at times. He laughed easily, and when he cared about a subject, learned with a viciousness that rivaled even Remus's bookishness.

Most bizarrely though, was Harry's unending loyalty to Regulus. They had an odd dynamic that Sirius didn't understand at first. Though they were clearly friends, Harry treated Regulus with a kind of deference that most thirteen-year-olds didn't even treat most adults they knew.

It took Sirius nearly all summer to realize that he treated Regulus like he was his father. He trusted him implicitly and obviously looked to him for support. It was sweet in a weird sort of way. Sirius thought he should probably feel jealous that Regulus got to experience that relationship with Harry when it should have been him or Remus or especially James instead, but those feelings never came.

If anything, Sirius loved seeing the strange soft side of Regulus. It reminded him of what Regulus had been like as a child, quick to tears and so gentle that Sirius worried he would be crushed under the darkness of their family. He had been, Sirius reminded himself often, he was crushed under it the moment Sirius left him alone in the dark hallways of Grimmauld Place. He did his best not to suffocate himself with those thoughts, instead, he resolved not to make the same mistake again.

That was why he was going upstairs to check on Regulus. He had left the library several hours before and had never returned. It was already evening when Regulus went to destroy the locket, and Sirius had ended up dozing off at a desk once Remus went to bed. Sirius had expected Regulus to come back though, he figured Regulus would at least update him once the locket was destroyed.

When Sirius jolted awake, his neck hurting due to his poor sleeping position, it was nearly four in the morning. He grumbled slightly as he stumbled up the stairs to check on Regulus. He had expected to find him in his bedroom, most likely asleep, totally unaware that Sirius had stayed up waiting for him, or tried to at least. He gave a cursory knock before busting the door to his room open. It was a bit rude, he would admit, but he was tired, cranky and his neck hurt.

It was empty. His bed was still made, and it looked untouched. He headed to the study next, but as he got closer, he could feel that something was wrong. If anything, seeing the empty bed at four in the morning, made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Once he reached the study door, he was swallowed whole by panic.

There were powerful wards keeping him out, wards he didn't recognize. While they felt like they were made of Regulus's magic, they weren't quite right. It was like some foreign entity had invaded a spell Regulus had cast. He thought back to Regulus's causal mention of being possessed by a different Horcrux. What if that was happening again? What if Regulus was being drained and killed at that very moment?

He didn't think any more than that. Hysteria took over, and he began clawing at the ward with everything he had. His magic wasn't affecting them at all. He tore and tore but nothing happened. Worse still was the fact that the wards were fighting back, and it wasn't just

hurting him magically, but physically as well. When he pushed too hard in one specific spot, the ward seemed to reach out and cut him.

Blood was running down his arms by the time he grew too tired to keep fighting. He was breathing heavily, the panic still coursing through him, but now it was paired with dread. His brother was probably dead or dying right that second, and he couldn't do anything.

He slipped down into his Animagus form almost on instinct. The ward felt different when he was a dog. Most wards weren't meant to keep out animals, so it was unusual to encounter one that was still intent on excluding him. The oddest thing though was the fact that Padfoot could practically see the ward.

It looked almost like three different wards mixed together. He could see the one Regulus had originally placed on the room, they shimmered and sparkled like a river made of melted silver. Another one looked like mold. It had a rotten scent to it that would have repelled any normal animal, their instincts telling them to run the other way. The last one moved like black sludge, intertwining with the other two. That one was the most insidious, the one that had attacked him.

He tried to push through as Padfoot, but the black ward pushed back so violently that he was thrown against the opposite wall. He pushed back to his feet, but it was a struggle. He could already feel a bruise forming along his ribs. He walked back to the door but could find no solution. The thought of losing Regulus again began to swirl in his head like a venomous snake. He took a labored breath in, his ribs twinging in pain, and collapsed outside of the door.

"Sirius, what's going on?" Remus asked him a few minutes later. He must have been making a lot of noise if he had woken Remus from several floors away. He shifted back, and Remus immediately gasped. "What happened?"

Sirius looked down in confusion at himself. He had forgotten about the cuts on his arms and chest caused by the black ward. Physical pain like that, especially cuts, barely bothered him anymore. It was like he was permanently disconnected from his corporeal body.

"It's the wards," Sirius mumbled, gesturing toward the study door.

"The wards Regulus put up did this to you?" Remus asked, already pulling out his wand and casting quick, wordless healing spells on the gashes. Sirius sighed in relief, the tightness from the wounds easing.

"No, there are other ones up. I can't get through them, and Regulus is trapped in there. It's been way too long," Sirius replied.

"He hasn't come out all night?" Remus asked. He started poking around the wards, but gently, making sure not to incur any injuries.

"No, I don't think so," Sirius replied. "Remus, I don't know what to do. What if he's — what if —" Remus's arms were around him in a second, grounding and comforting him.

“We will find a way to get him out,” Remus said assuredly. “I think we should call Dumbledore.”

“Right now?” Sirius mumbled, leaning his forehead against Remus’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I was about to head there anyway to talk about Bellatrix’s vault,” Remus said.

“At four in the morning?” Sirius asked, lifting his head so he could look at him. Remus’s eyebrows furrowed.

“It’s nearly ten,” Remus said. “I didn’t realize either of you were even up here.”

“Ten?” Sirius asked. He hadn’t even realized that he’d fallen asleep. That meant that Regulus had been stuck in that room for nearly twelve hours. Sirius didn’t even notice his breath speeding up before Remus placed a palm on his chest encouraging him to calm down.

“I’ll go get Dumbledore now,” he said quietly and was gone. Sirius fell heavily against the wall and slid down to sit on the ground, hanging his head down between his knees. He tried not to let the thought of Regulus alone and drowning fill his head again, but it was nearly impossible to avoid the thought.

He hadn’t stopped thinking of the way Regulus had died since Regulus told him the story. He kept wondering if he ever would have known what happened to Regulus had he not come back. Would Sirius have lived out the rest of his days thinking Regulus was an unredeemable Death Eater? Would Sirius have died never knowing about the sacrifice his brother had made? The thought haunted him worse than anything else.

“Dumbledore is heading over,” Remus said, his voice was like opening a window to clear out the dust of Sirius’s thoughts. Sirius looked up to find Remus crouched next to him. “Have you eaten?”

“No,” Sirius said, shaking his head. “Not sure I could.” Remus looked unhappy about his response, but for once, didn’t argue. Sirius still hadn’t recovered his pre-Azkaban appetite. Most days he ate only because Regulus, Remus, and occasionally Harry would remind him. They always did it gently, asking him to sit with them while they ate dinner and quietly offering him a plate, but it wasn’t as subtle as they probably thought it was.

If Sirius was alone, he probably wouldn’t eat at all until he grew too tired to move. That’s how he had lived in the year he was hunting Peter, only eating when he absolutely needed to, and even then it was mostly just hunting animals and eating without really tasting them.

“Hello,” Dumbledore’s soft voice said. He was making his way up the stairs of Grimmauld, wand already drawn. “Remus mentioned you had a problem with one of your wards.”

Sirius got the bizarre, overwhelming urge to change into Padfoot and dig his teeth into Dumbledore’s throat. He knew the man was there to help them, but there was something about the impotent feeling of being incapable of helping Regulus himself that made him snappy.

“Yes,” Remus answered when Sirius remained hauntingly silent. He gestured toward the study door, and Dumbledore began casting complicated spells on it. Sirius wasn’t familiar with warding or curse-breaking, but it was clear Dumbledore was. Unsurprising given how old he was, Sirius would guess that he was nearly an expert in many magical topics.

The spell Dumbledore cast on the door eventually made the wards visible to the naked eye. They were like the ones Sirius could see as Padfoot, except with more color and detail. The silver lake one was actually glittery gold, so beautiful that it made Sirius’s eyes hurt. The mold was a mixture of greens, purples, and blues. It almost looked like a bruise. More than that, it looked textured, made of hills and valleys that traversed its length.

The last one, the black one, wove around the other two like vines. It reminded Sirius of devil’s snare. It gripped around the others like it was trying to strangle them. Every now and then a flash of red would spread along the black vines. Dumbledore continued to cast diagnostic spells that Sirius didn’t recognize, but Sirius couldn’t tear his eyes away from the black vine.

He kept picturing that vine working its way around Regulus, crushing him beneath its tight grip. He imagined his face growing red then purple, his lips blue from lack of oxygen. He imagined his silver eyes rolling back in his head as he choked on air, his ribs collapsing around his lungs. Sirius wasn’t even aware that he tried to attack the black ward again until Remus was pulling him back, already healing the fresh wound that had bloomed on his chest.

“Sirius, stop,” Remus said, his voice faint and panicked.

“It’s killing him,” Sirius argued, trying to fight against Remus’s strong grip. Dumbledore was watching him with concerned eyes.

“Do you think so?” Dumbledore asked, his voice giving away nothing.

“We have to get through,” Sirius begged.

“Yes, I believe we do,” Dumbledore said and began casting offensive spells against the black ward. He kept having to throw up shields to keep them from getting hurt as the ward fought back. Sirius’s breaths turned shallow again. It wasn’t working. Regulus was dying and there was nothing they could do.

“Breath, Sirius,” Remus implored as Sirius’s vision started to go black. He did his best to suck in air, but it felt like it had no effect on the tight feeling in his chest.

“Please,” Sirius said, though he wasn’t sure who he was speaking to or what he was even asking.

Dumbledore stopped, just long enough to pass his wand from his right hand to his left, but in that split second the black ward fell. Sirius didn’t understand how, but it was there one minute and gone the next.

“What?” Sirius breathed. Remus was still holding him back, refusing to let him go.

“I still cannot get through these other two, but at least they won’t attack us,” Dumbledore said. Sirius wiggled out of Remus’s grasp and transformed back into Padfoot. The black ward kept his Animagus form out, but the other two shouldn’t put up any resistance.

He rammed into the door so roughly that he felt it break as it swung open and in a split second he was inside the room. Regulus was laying in the center of the room, choking and coughing as the remnants of a dark, smog circled him. Next to Regulus was James, crouched at his side, watching as Regulus suffocated. Sirius ignored him. He had had more hallucinations of James than nearly anyone else, and he wasn’t going to let this one stop him from helping his brother.

Sirius transformed just as Regulus began to lose consciousness. “REMUS,” he yelled. The moment Regulus’s eyes shut, the wards around the room fell. The James hallucination stood up before disappearing as well.

“Floo Madam Pomfrey,” Lupin said to Dumbledore, his voice commanding. Dumbledore, a man that was certainly unused to being bossed around, didn’t even argue. “Is he breathing?”

“I don’t know,” Sirius sobbed. He leaned in close to Regulus and waited with bated breath. It was a long second before Regulus pulled in a shuddering breath through parted lips. Sirius placed his shaking hands on Regulus’s chest, his head falling forward as relief washed over him.

Remus placed a comforting hand on his back. “He did it,” Remus breathed.

“Did what?” Sirius responded. Remus reached over and very carefully lifted the destroyed locket that lay on the floor next to him. Sirius hadn’t even noticed it in his panic to get to Regulus.

“Another one down,” Remus said grimly.

Chapter End Notes

sirius pov!! ugh, i love him.

both sirius and regulus are so fucking sad and i relate to them.

you might wonder why sirius didn’t call kreacher. it’s literally just cause sirius never thinks about kreacher unless he is forced to.

the tournament.

Chapter Notes

it's my birthday today!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took Regulus nineteen days to wake up after destroying the Horcrux. He wasn't aware that so much time had passed at first. He didn't even feel rested when he first woke up. He felt like he had just gone to sleep after drinking too much, like a hangover had dragged him into unconsciousness.

When he first opened his eyes, his bedroom was filled with soft afternoon light. His eyes ached as he opened them, they felt dry and swollen. He blinked against the light, a headache already forming at the base of his skull. He lifted his hands to rub them, his arms protested the movement, twinging with pain, and he gave up. Every part of his body ached. He blinked blearily.

"Hey," a voice said. Regulus looked over to see James, fully dressed, sitting on the bed next to him, propped up against the bed frame with his long legs stretched out in front of him, one ankle crossed over the other.

"Potter?" Regulus asked, his voice scratchy from lack of use. James gave him a sideways smirk, though there was a sadness to it.

"Back to Potter, am I?" he asked, one corner of his mouth turning down into a frown.

"What's going on?" Regulus responded rather than answering his question.

"You've been asleep for a while," James responded. "Sirius has been so worried. He's like a mother hen." James chuckled softly, reaching two of his long fingers up to scratch his face. "I thought Remus was going to pull his hair out trying to take care of all of you."

"Sirius?" Regulus asked, his head still felt too heavy to lift off the bed, so he had to stay watching James from the odd angle. "What? Are you... here?"

"Not exactly," James said, that slight frown was back, though it was only visible for a second before James schooled his expression. "But I'm not stuck anymore I don't think. I don't understand it really, but I can see more." He looked down then, making direct eye contact with Regulus. His hazel eyes seemed to drill into Regulus's as if imploring him to understand what he was really saying. "But only if it's you."

"What?" Regulus repeated, his head felt like it was full of cotton, his thoughts fighting their way to the forefront of his mind and failing.

Suddenly the door to his bedroom cracked open. “Reggie? I heard talking,” Sirius said faintly. He was looking at Regulus when he opened the door fully, but Regulus swore he saw Sirius do a double take to where James sat, before looking back at Regulus as if nothing happened.

“That’s new too,” James whispered. “It’s not all the time, but... it’s something.”

“Can you speak?” Sirius asked, his voice laced with worry, walking forward to stand next to the bed, placing a hand on Regulus’s forehead as if he was checking for a fever. Regulus wondered where he learned to do that.

“What happened?” Regulus asked, doing his best to ignore James propped up next to him, watching the entire exchange with a small little grin.

“You destroyed the locket, but it fought back. We thought you might not wake up,” Sirius said. He pulled out a wand that Regulus recognized as Lupin’s and began casting a few basic diagnostic spells.

“It’s really gone?” Regulus asked. He tried to sit up again, but Sirius laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, holding him down.

“Let me call Pomfrey,” Sirius said, his voice unsteady in a way that Regulus found unnerving. Regulus suddenly understood what James meant by Sirius acting like a mother hen with the way he was flittering around the room, his hands moving erratically like he didn’t quite know what to do with them. “You’ve been out for a while. I’m not...”

“How long is a while?” Regulus asked him, but Sirius was already striding out of the room. “How long is a while?” he repeated to James. James cringed slightly.

“I’m not sure exactly,” James said. “I can’t see everything, but it’s been long enough for Sirius to start losing his mind.”

“That happened way before now,” Regulus said.

James chuckled, though Regulus didn’t think he meant it as a joke. His head hurt so badly. “I - I saw Harry,” James said, his voice dropping to a whisper again. Regulus smiled at him, though James’s eyes suddenly looked distant, a few unshed tears fighting their way out.

“This is the strangest dream I have ever had,” Regulus mumbled suddenly.

“Surely not,” James said with a lighthearted laugh, seemingly relieved to avoid talking about his son even though he was the one to bring him up. “You never had a dream where you could turn into a cat or something?” Regulus squinted his eyes at him.

“I did use to pretend to be a cat when I was little,” Regulus said. James laughed loudly.

“You never told me that,” James said, grinning down at him. Regulus smiled a little.

“Didn’t really mean to tell you now,” Regulus replied. “But it hardly matters, does it? It’s not like a hallucination can spill my dirty little secret.” Regulus laughed and only barely caught

sight of the way James's face fell a little. He didn't have the time to ask about it, because suddenly the door opened and Sirius and Pomfrey were entering the room.

"Did I hear laughing?" Sirius asked confusedly. Pomfrey gave him a slightly odd look before she began casting spells on Regulus. It turned out that Regulus was both physically and magically fine, just exhausted. Sirius was sure that he had been attacked by the Horcrux, demanding multiple times in a row that Pomfrey check again to make sure nothing was wrong, but nothing was found. She gave him a potion for pain, and Regulus finally felt his headache recede.

"It's good to see you awake," Pomfrey said quietly. "I look forward to seeing you back at school." Regulus's eyebrows raised halfway up his forehead.

"What does she mean?" Regulus asked the moment he and Sirius were alone again. James was still in the room, though now he was lingering near the window, idly looking out on the street.

"It's September," Sirius said softly. Regulus thought about when he had last been awake, he was pretty sure Harry left on the twenty-fifth of August.

"I've been asleep for six days?" he demanded loudly. He was finally feeling well enough to sit up, but it was a struggle. Sirius reached back to prop up the pillows so that he could lean on them.

"No," Sirius said slowly, actively avoiding eye contact. "It's the fourteenth. You've been asleep for nineteen days." Regulus's mouth hung open in shock.

"Nineteen?" he asked faintly. "How is that even possible?"

"It was the Horcrux," Sirius shouted suddenly, finally looking Regulus dead in the eyes. "I don't think you should be alone the next time you destroy one." Regulus rolled his eyes. "I'm not joking," Sirius said solemnly.

Regulus sighed. "Yes, fine," he said, more intent on ending the conversation than actually agreeing to demands. "How is Harry? What did you tell him?"

"Oh, well, Harry's..." Sirius suddenly seemed very interested in the cobwebs in the corner of his room. He wondered when the last time Kreacher cleaned was.

"What?" Regulus asked, his heart rate climbing erratically.

"Let me just," Sirius said, trailing off before practically sprinting out of the room.

"What's wrong with Harry?" Regulus said loudly, trying to sit up more so that he could climb out of bed. Suddenly there were light fingers against his chest, lightly pushing him back down. "How?" Regulus mumbled as he looked up at James's unhappy face.

"I don't think you should move too much," James said seriously.

“How are you touching me?” Regulus asked. James just shrugged. “What happened to Harry? Is he okay?” He thought of the tears he saw earlier. What if Harry had been hurt?

“You need to calm down, you’re going to hurt yourself,” James said firmly. Regulus hadn’t even noticed that he had started hyperventilating.

Sirius came back in the room a few seconds later with Lupin in tow. Lupin had dark circles under his eyes like he hadn’t slept in days. He was holding a cup of tea in one hand, his other hand scratching at the scruff on his face.

“How are you feeling?” Lupin asked politely when he and Regulus made eye contact. He even sounded tired.

“Fine,” Regulus answered quickly. “What’s happening with Harry? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” Lupin answered. He gave Sirius a questioning look, which Sirius responded to by looking like a kicked puppy. Lupin shook his head a little, a small fond smile crossing his face before disappearing again. “He’s safe and back at Hogwarts.” The way Lupin wasn’t fully answering the question, made nerves prickle at his skin.

“What happened?” Regulus answered, trying once again to fully sit up. He wanted to stand, he hated laying in bed like a dying Victorian child while Lupin and Sirius looked down at him. His chest ached though, and he ended up collapsed back on the pillows instead.

“It was at the World Cup,” Lupin said, his voice calm and collected.

“Oh no,” Regulus groaned, rubbing a hand across his eyes. “I knew he shouldn’t have gone.”

The explanation that unfolded made Regulus feel like he was going to stretch out of his skin. He was so stressed just hearing about it, even though he knew Harry and the others were completely fine. He couldn’t even imagine what it must have been like to learn about it in real-time. He was pretty sure he would have spontaneously combusted from anxiety had he been awake to hear Kreacher come back and tell them what was going on. He was glad that he had sent Kreacher to watch over Harry though, because Kreacher was able to apparate the kid back to Grimmauld with only minimal side effects when things started to go wrong.

Of course, this stressed Arthur and the others out so much that there was almost a full panic. According to Ron, Harry was standing with them in the middle of the woods looking for his wand when Kreacher showed up and apparated him away. Apparently, Kreacher had come back to tell them something was wrong, just as Regulus had instructed him to, and Sirius had told him just to bring Harry home immediately.

Apparating that far was nearly impossible for most wizards, not to mention that there were anti-apparition wards all around the area for the World Cup, so when Harry arrived he lost all the food he had eaten that day, vomiting all over the floor in the entryway before promptly passing out for several minutes. He was fine when he woke up, but Regulus doubted he would be inclined to apparate anytime soon after that.

They brought his wand back later that morning. Someone had stolen it from him and used it to cast *Morsmordre*. Just hearing about the spell made Regulus shiver uncomfortably. Clearly, the Death Eaters were in motion again if they felt comfortable casting that old incantation, especially somewhere like the World Cup. They still hadn't discovered who was involved, though Regulus had a few guesses given which Death Eaters were still around. So many of them had narrowly avoided prison sentences.

Overall, it was a horrible night, but at least Harry was safe. It didn't even seem like anyone was trying to abduct him, as the Death Eaters came just to cause a riot before scampering away like a bunch of cowards. Still, the thought of the Dark Lord out there planning attacks again, made Regulus feel vaguely ill. It was all happening again and there was still so much to do.

"Any updates on the Horcruxes?" Regulus asked. They needed to get a move on and make some headway into killing the Dark Lord. He was coming after Harry and the rest of the Wizarding World now.

"Dumbledore doesn't know how to get into the Lestrage Vault," Sirius answered. "Besides physically breaking in, which would be incredibly risky and nearly impossible."

Regulus nodded in understanding, already playing out different options for how they could break in. He had spent too much time waiting around, and if he had to risk dying or getting arrested after breaking into Gringotts, then that's what he would have to do.

"Technically you both could have access to the vault," Lupin said. Sirius and Regulus looked at him curiously. "There are no other heirs to the Lestrage vault beyond Rodolphus and Rabastan, and Bellatrix used to be a Black, so if all of them died, the Black family could lay claim to the vault."

"How do you know this?" Sirius asked curiously.

"I've been doing some research on the family," Lupin answered. "I needed something to do since you never let me sleep." The last words were spoken irritably, and Regulus noticed the flash of hurt on Sirius's face before he shrugged like he wasn't bothered. Lupin either didn't notice it or didn't care.

"So Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Bellatrix have to die in order for us to have access to the vault without breaking in?" Regulus clarified. Lupin finally dragged his eyes away from Sirius and nodded.

"So what? We have to kill them?" Sirius asked incredulously, though Regulus could already see him thinking about it.

"With all of them in Azkaban, we don't have access to them. Breaking in there isn't exactly any easier than breaking into Gringotts," Regulus said with a sigh. "So what do we do?"

"For now, I think we should focus on finding the others," Lupin said. "Leave the Lestrage Vault for last. We don't want someone to realize what we're after before we have time to find the rest of them."

Regulus sighed heavily throwing his head against the pillows twice in frustration. They didn't have any other leads on where to find them, which meant the Dark Lord would still be coming, he was out there planning on kidnapping Harry to do Merlin knows what with him, and Regulus couldn't do anything about it.

"I need to get to the school," Regulus said.

"Are you sure?" Sirius asked. "You're still pretty weak."

"Yes, I'm sure," Regulus said, rolling his eyes.

It turned out that he really didn't have enough energy to go right then. Lupin brought him dinner, which he was almost positive had some sort of sleeping draught mixed in, and Regulus slept for another twelve hours before he was finally able to get out of bed on his own. He made sure to call Kreacher the next day and thank him for rescuing Harry. He was beyond grateful that the elf was looking out for him.

Kreacher packed his trunk for him the next day and apparated him to the gates of Hogwarts. He had sent a quick owl to Dumbledore to let him know. The floo was closed at Hogwarts now that the new school year was in session. The gates opened for him automatically and he walked alone up to the school. It was midafternoon on a Thursday, so the grounds were completely empty as he traversed them.

It was oddly nice to walk up to the school in such a peaceful environment. He felt weirdly relieved to be out of Grimmauld Place. Sirius and Lupin were making him anxious. There was clearly something going on there, some mixture of complicated feelings that Regulus didn't care to know about. He certainly didn't want to be there when those feelings bubbled over. Somehow a castle filled with children was less dramatic than two emotionally stunted men orbiting each other.

He went straight up to the Gryffindor dorms, unshrinking his trunk and unpacking his stuff slowly. He would have to start his classes tomorrow, but for today he was planning to just take it easy. His energy had luckily returned, and he didn't feel as tired as he had the day before, but he still wasn't overly inclined to push himself too much.

He was only alone in the dorm for about an hour before classes must have let out.

"Regulus!" a voice called behind him. He just barely had time to turn around before Harry and Ron were hugging him. Regulus chuckled lightly.

"Hey, guys," he said, an easy smile on his face. It felt good to be back with his friends.

"I'm so glad you're okay!" Harry practically yelled when they both pulled away.

"They told you he would be," Ron said with a little laugh.

"Still," Harry said to Ron. "Did you just get here?" He directed the question to Regulus. Regulus nodded.

“We have so much to update you on,” Ron said. Harry immediately agreed. They headed out of the dorm, having a few free hours before dinner, and walked down so they could lounge by the lake. The weather was still nice, only halfway through September, and the sun was warm on their skin as they lay out in the grass. Hermione and Luna joined them just a moment later, walking down from the castle together to Regulus’s surprise.

It was interesting seeing them all together again. Ron had already shot up in height. It wasn’t exactly a surprise given how tall his brothers and father were, but he looked odd and gangly next to the rest of them. He was a bit too skinny for his lanky frame, and it was clear certain parts of his body were growing at different rates. His hands, for instance, looked huge compared to his arms, like a puppy who had yet to grow into his paws.

Regulus still felt short, but he didn’t hit his growth spurt until fifth year during his first life, so he didn’t feel too bad about being shorter. Luna was tiny compared to the rest of them, but Pandora had always been small, and Regulus doubted Luna would outgrow her by much, though he had never met Luna’s father. Harry and Hermione were still basically the same height, Hermione only an inch taller. Regulus wondered if the malnutrition Harry had dealt with would affect him in the long run or if he was just a late bloomer.

James was already taller than most of his friends by fourteen, Sirius being the exception. Sirius was the tallest of his friend group until partway through their fourth year when Lupin shot up and was suddenly towering over most students in his year and the years above. James outgrew Sirius by the time he started his fifth year. Pettigrew stayed the same height though, always the shortest among them. Regulus didn’t really notice at the time, but having seen Pettigrew as an adult he could suddenly remember how the boy looked trailing after his friends.

“All right,” Regulus prompted. “What do you have to update me on?” They all looked at each other like they weren’t sure who was supposed to start before breaking into laughter.

“Okay,” Harry said once he had calmed down. “What do you know about the Triwizard Tournament?”

It turned out that Ron was definitely not kidding about having a lot to update them on. He hadn’t had the time or inclination to talk to Lupin or Sirius much before leaving Grimmauld, but he was sure they already knew about the tournament. The tournament hadn’t taken place in more than a century, yet Fudge had decided that now was a good time to reinstate it. Regulus didn’t know much about it, other than the basic information he had learned in History of Magic during his first life, but Hermione was quick to fill him in.

The last tournament had taken place in the late 1700s and had been discontinued due to its high death toll. Apparently, there was very little regulation present during the last games, not surprising considering how wizards acted. Hermione went on a long rant about the possible safety issues this time around and what they would change to make sure no one died. Ron and Harry seemed terribly bored by this, clearly only interested in how exciting each task would be. Luna listened politely, nodding along with all the suggestions Hermione was making.

“We get to meet students from other schools too,” Harry said, his eyes wide with enthusiasm.

“Yeah, but you have to be seventeen to enter,” Ron said disappointedly. “It sucks, I would have loved to compete.”

“Ronald,” Hermione chastised. “It’s incredibly dangerous for a fully grown adult, it would be completely irresponsible for them to let an underage wizard participate.” Ron rolled his eyes.

“Maybe you can predict who's going to compete,” Luna suggested lightly. Ron’s disappointment evaporated on the spot.

“That’s a great idea!” he said. Hermione pursed her lips contemptuously but didn’t say anything.

“What schools are joining us?” Regulus asked, trying to distract them before the conversation was derailed.

“Beauxbatons and Durmstrang,” Hermione said cheerfully. Regulus raised his eyebrows in surprise. He didn’t know too much about the schools. There were a few distant members of his family that had gone to Beauxbatons, but he had never met them. His parents had talked about Durmstrang a few times when he was a child — mostly in relation to sending Sirius there as a punishment, but he didn’t think any members of the Black family had ever attended that school.

“Who is the new Defense teacher?” Regulus asked a few moments later.

“Oh, he’s so cool,” Ron said immediately. The others didn’t seem to agree with him quite as much, but Ron kept talking before any of them could interject. “He used to be an Auror.”

Hermione gave Regulus a curious look before speaking. “His name is Alastor Moody.”

Chapter End Notes

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also, i have started writing a jegulus twilight au if any of you are interested: [solar flare](https://solarflare.tumblr.com/)

the updates.

Chapter Notes

cw: some vague mentions to suicide

i decided to upload one more chapter today as celebration. enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Moody?” Regulus breathed.

“Have you heard of him?” Ron asked interestedly.

Regulus had forgotten about Moody. The moment he heard the name leave Hermione’s mouth, he was suddenly transported back to the night Evan Rosier died. Barty, who was already living life on the edge of mania, had lost his mind, nearly lighting his father’s manor on fire in his rage and grief. Regulus didn’t even have the space to deal with his own feelings about what happened until weeks later.

He had never been overly close to Evan. Evan was a year older than them and Regulus spent most of his time by himself. He hadn’t really made friends until his third year, and even then it was just the kind of people that he studied with, rather than real friends. It wasn’t like his second life, where he spent every waking moment with Harry, Ron, Hermione, or Luna. Even outside of them, he had tons of peripheral friends, who he didn’t mind spending time with. Gryffindors really had it so easy.

It made Regulus think of Draco with a feeling of melancholy. Draco had his two friends, Crabbe and Goyle, but Regulus would bet everything in the Black vaults that those two weren’t actually friends and were instead borderline strangers whose fathers had told them to follow Draco around like a pair of goons. They were probably closer to each other than they would ever be to Draco. Regulus wondered if that loneliness contributed to his continued obsession with Harry.

The other Slytherin boys seemed just as lonely. Regulus had seen Nott lurking by himself numerous times. Zabini seemed to get along with the Slytherin girls, but even then, he was usually seen alone. Regulus pitied them. He had been them in another life, and he knew how intense that isolation could be.

He remembered seeing Sirius with his band of idiots, full of rage and rejection and grief for the brother who abandoned him. There were times when he was so angry that he would think Sirius wasn’t really friends with them, how it was all just an act. It wasn’t until James started his slow descent into Regulus’s life that Regulus realized what his brother had every single day. It was never for Regulus though, he was always an imposter. Even now, in his second life as a Gryffindor, he was nothing but a charlatan.

Evan Rosier had been just as lonely. He was a quiet kid, even by Slytherin standards. Regulus wasn't sure he heard him talk during their first few years of school. Barty was loud and obnoxious, but he still avoided the other Slytherin boys, opting to spend his time with the girls or people in other houses. It wasn't until Barty zeroed in on Evan in his fourth year that things started to change. Evan had been a fifth year, but he seemed more accessible than the other fifth years.

Regulus had barely been aware of it at the time, too wrapped up in his own life to notice what was going on, especially when he watched Sirius get shunned by his friends and nearly starve himself to death. Regulus remembered the desperation he felt during that time, the fear that one day he would wake up to find that Sirius had done something stupid and that Regulus would never see him again, even from across the Great Hall.

While all of that was happening, Evan was starting to sneak into Barty's bed every few nights. Regulus started dating James the next year and couldn't have cared less about Barty and Evan. They were usually gone anyway, sneaking off together to do Merlin knows what. When things imploded with James, and Regulus was left alone all over again, he finally realized that Barty and Evan had progressed far past the hook-up stage of their relationship.

Regulus didn't think that Barty was really capable of that kind of relationship, but he could see that he was trying for Evan, who turned out to be quite soft once Regulus got to know him. Barty was always haunted by a general lack of empathy and fiery energy that swept him up with every action he took. Barty was always on the edge of madness, but he tempered that madness as best he could for Evan.

When Evan was killed by Aurors, Moody specifically, Regulus was sure Barty was going to torture and kill every Auror he could get his hands on. He was going to kill them, then Regulus just because he happened to be around, and then himself. Regulus tried his best to keep him from losing his mind, but by the time Regulus died, he had cut Barty off completely. He was too young and inexperienced to deal with a person like that.

The grief that Barty felt was like nothing Regulus could understand. Even when Regulus discovered that James had died, he didn't think he felt like that. With James, it was like Regulus knew deep in his soul that he was gone, and he felt a quiet emptiness, a hollow feeling that consumed him the moment he let it. He never felt violent though. He wondered if it was because James had left him long before he died. He wondered how he would feel if he lost James while they were still together and if he would feel differently.

All this was to say that finding out that Moody, the man who had killed Evan and destroyed Barty in the process, was teaching at the school was not exactly good news. Though Regulus wasn't under some false idea that Evan was the epitome of moral rectitude, he was a Death Eater just like Regulus and Barty were, he still didn't like the idea of having to interact with his killer. Not to mention the fact that the few things Regulus had heard about Moody weren't very good.

"Yeah, it's so wicked," Ron said with excitement. "He's really been there, you know?" He spoke with clear awe and amazement.

"He's a little..." Harry trailed off uncertainly.

“Intense,” Hermione supplied. Harry nodded.

“Yes, exactly!” Ron nearly shouted, though Regulus was sure he didn’t mean it in the same way.

“Intense how?” Regulus asked. He tried to appear as relaxed as possible, to not give away that worry was beginning to prick down his spine.

“Well, for one,” Ron began, “he turned Malfoy into a ferret.” Harry burst into laughter just as Ron finished speaking, covering his mouth as his eyes crinkled with delight. Hermione looked like she was fighting laughter herself, the corners of her lips upturned slightly.

“Oh, yes,” Luna’s light twinkly voice interrupted. “I bet that was very scary for poor Draco.”

“Poor Draco?” Ron said incredulously, even as laughter continued to spill out of him.

Luna nodded seriously. “He did not look happy after the fact,” she said solemnly.

“Why did Moody turn Draco into a ferret?” Regulus asked, trying to reel the group back in so that he could get answers. Ron and Harry did their best to explain, though the laughter made it difficult to follow the plot. While Regulus understood that Draco could be a stuck-up and spoiled little shit, he couldn’t help but feel for him. Being humiliated by a professor like that had to be traumatizing. Regulus doubted Moody had anything good to say about the Malfoys.

“There was also his first class,” Luna said once they had finished their story.

“Yeah,” Ron said, nodding emphatically. “He went over the three Unforgivable Curses.”

“He did what?” Regulus said, now sitting up straight, earlier relaxation forgotten. “Even in your class, Luna?”

Luna nodded. “Yes, he said that we were very behind, that we should have already known.”

“Not just that,” Hermione said, an unhappy frown taking over her face. “He demonstrated the spells.” Hermione’s face grew vaguely ill as she spoke, and Regulus noticed that Harry also paled significantly. Ron seemed woefully unaware of their reactions, still processing how impressed he was by the professor.

“That’s insane,” Regulus said. “Does Dumbledore know he’s doing that?”

Ron shrugged. “My dad said that Dumbledore specifically asked Moody to come and teach this year. Maybe he was the one who told Moody to show us the curses,” Ron said.

“I doubt that,” Regulus muttered. He would have to look into it more, but there wasn’t much he could do at the moment. “Anything else?”

“Well, Snape is in an extra foul mood,” Harry said.

“Yeah, he’s been taking it out on Neville specifically. Moody hates Snape, which is brilliant, but it also means that Snape keeps threatening to poison someone at random this year,” Ron added.

“It’s so sad for Neville,” Luna said, looking off into the distance. “Herbology and Potions are important subjects to each other, you would think he would be better at the topic.”

“He probably would be if he had a competent teacher,” Regulus said, though he wasn’t one to talk. He had been taught by Slughorn, just as Snape had, and that man was far more interested in schmoozing with students than actually teaching. He would have never guessed that Snape would be even worse of a teacher.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Hermione said, taking out a small box from her bag. Ron groaned loudly.

“Not this, please,” Ron said. “Don’t drag Regulus into one of your schemes.”

“What’s happening now?” Regulus asked when Hermione opened her mouth to shout at Ron, a blotchy, unattractive blush already spreading across her face.

“I’ve decided to form a group,” Hermione said. “The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare or S. P. E. W.” She spoke proudly, her shoulders squaring with determination. Ron rolled his eyes but didn’t interrupt again.

“What is this about?” Regulus asked curiously.

“Now you’ve done it,” Ron muttered, but Regulus’s question was all Hermione needed to launch into her explanation.

Regulus had never given much thought to house elves. He had been practically raised by a few, though Kreacher was the only one who was still alive, but as a child, he saw them more like furniture than actual beings. It wasn’t until he was about eight years old that he and Kreacher became friends. It was after his father yelled at him for something or other, he couldn’t remember, and he ran down into the kitchen, trying with all his might to keep his tears from falling. It was always worse when they actually cried.

Kreacher found him down there, in a place he wasn’t supposed to be, curled up under the kitchen table. Sirius had been taken to an event with his mother so he wasn’t home, and Regulus was feeling especially lonely. Kreacher told Regulus to go back to his room, which Regulus did and he later brought him a warm bowl of freshly made stew. It was strange what small gestures meant so much to a child faced with emotional neglect. Regulus was so comforted by it, that Kreacher started becoming his go-to elf whenever he needed something.

They had been through so much by now, especially given Regulus’s death and rebirth under Kreacher’s watchful eye. Despite that, Regulus still had never considered Kreacher the same way he considered his friends or even other wizards. As he listened to Hermione rant and rave about house-elf treatment and her plan to free them all, he couldn’t help but think about his mother and what she would think.

When he first started his second life, he had felt so indifferent to the woman, but somehow, now that he had witnessed her portrait screaming at Sirius over and over again, he felt a strange vindication knowing that he would be disappointing her. He would have hated it during his first life, but she was long dead now and he wasn't a kid anymore.

"All right," Regulus said. "Can I have a badge?" He reached his hand out, his palm flat in the air. Hermione seemed beyond shocked by his question, but that was nothing compared to the others.

"You actually agree with her?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Wow," Luna said, her voice more surprised than he had ever heard it.

Hermione shook herself out of her shock and placed one of the badges in his waiting hand. He took it and immediately charmed it to stick to his jumper. He wasn't sure that he agreed with what she was saying, he was sure he would need to think about it more, but it was clear that it was important to the girl, and he wasn't about to deny her.

They went to dinner later and Regulus looked around curiously for Moody, but he wasn't there. The thought of seeing the man made his stomach churn, and he felt an uncomfortable prickle at his skin. Later that night, after the others had gone to bed, Regulus and Harry stayed up by the fire.

"Did Sirius tell you about my scar?" Harry asked.

"No," Regulus responded. "What about your scar?"

"It's been hurting again. I told Sirius about it, but he kind of... freaked out. I thought he was going to come storm the school and get himself caught again," Harry said.

"That does sound like him," Regulus said. "You've been talking to him since you got back?"

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling all of a sudden, "he gave me this mirror so we can talk to each other. He said the mirrors used to belong to him and James."

Regulus raised his eyebrows a bit. "Oh, well, that's great," Regulus said. "I'm glad you're able to talk to him. When was your scar hurting?"

"Since the world cup, basically on and off," Harry said, the corners of his lips turning down slightly. "I don't know what it means."

"Me either," Regulus admitted with a sigh. "I really don't know much about cursed scars, but I'll do some research and see what I can find. In the meantime, do you want me to get you some pain potions?"

"Yeah, that would be great," Harry said with a little smile. "Thanks, Reg."

"Of course," Regulus said, smiling right back. He felt comfortable being back at Hogwarts. It was strange how much the Gryffindor common room had become home for him in the last few years, but he found himself oddly content being there.

“I think I’m going to head to bed,” Harry said, standing up and stretching. “You coming?”

“I’m going to stay up a bit longer,” Regulus said. “Night.” Harry left a moment later, and Regulus let himself sink further into the large, comfy armchair. He let his eyes unfocus, staring into the fire as the flames jumped around. He was tired, but he also felt oddly restless, like he wasn’t ready to sequester himself off to bed.

“That was always my favorite chair,” James said suddenly.

“Ahh!” Regulus shouted, nearly jumping out of the chair. “Oh, Merlin. Don’t do that!”

“Sorry,” James said. He was sitting where Harry had been a moment earlier. It was the oddest thing because the last time Regulus had hallucinated James, he had been dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, like he was just lounging around the house, but now he was wearing a Gryffindor Quidditch sweater and black pants. Regulus wondered if his memories of James were affecting the hallucination. “What’s with the badge?”

Regulus followed James’s eye line and looked down at the S.P.E.W. badge. “Ah, Hermione gave it to me,” Regulus said.

“Who’s Hermione?” James asked, tilting his head.

“You don’t know who — she’s a Gryffindor in Harry’s year,” Regulus explained, feeling confused. “She’s trying to free all the house elves.”

“Oh,” James said with a chuckle. “That’s a noble cause.”

“Do you think so?” Regulus asked, genuinely curious.

James shrugged. “Li — err, someone else I used to know mentioned it a few times, that it was crazy that we owned house elves like that,” James said, looking chagrin at his misspeak.

Regulus rolled his eyes a little. “You don’t have to censor her name,” Regulus said.

“You didn’t appreciate me mentioning her before,” James said.

“She was the love of your life, James,” Regulus said. James’s face did something bizarre that Regulus didn’t understand so he powered on. “And she was Harry’s mum. I don’t dislike her. I’m — I’m glad that you found a way to be happy, even if it wasn’t with me.”

“You’ve changed so much,” James said quietly after a long beat of silence. “But you’re still so sad.” Regulus let out a chuckle against his will.

“Yeah, well,” Regulus said with a helpless shrug. “You always saw the worst of it.”

“Did I?” James said, his eyebrows furrowing. Regulus looked at him for a long moment.

“No, I guess not,” Regulus said. “Barty probably saw worse.”

“Barty?” James said, looking offended for a split second. “Why Barty?”

Regulus shrugged. “He was around,” he answered honestly. “And after Evan, he was just as sad.” He had never spoken about those months, but now they weighed heavily on his mind, thinking about Moody and Evan and Barty.

“Did you and him —” Regulus looked at him when he trailed off, but James couldn’t seem to finish his question.

“Yes,” he finally answered. James’s offended look was back.

“You and Barty?” James shouted, he didn’t sound angry, but there was a hurt there that Regulus found unbelievably funny.

“You had a wife and a kid without me,” Regulus said. “I hardly think you have any reason to be upset.” Regulus couldn’t stop giggling as he spoke, the little pout on James’s lips was just too funny.

“I just can’t believe it,” James said shaking his head. “I mean, I guess he was always sort of — I could see the appeal.” James seemed to be talking more to himself than to Regulus as he said it.

Regulus burst out laughing again after just getting himself under control. “Please,” Regulus begged. “The thought of you having a crush on Barty —”

“I never said I had a crush on him!” James yelled. “He was just, you know, tall. I can understand.” Regulus felt like his stomach was cramping from laughing too much. “I’m still not happy about it though.”

“Your unhappiness is noted,” Regulus said through one last laugh.

They were quiet after that, just enjoying the fire and each other's company. Regulus was so comfortable that he almost forgot that he had basically been talking to himself.

Chapter End Notes

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the stalker.

Chapter Notes

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Regulus had a lot to catch up on. He was already very behind in all of his classes. The professors intent on preparing students for the workloads they would face during fifth year O.W.L preparation had already loaded them up with classwork. There wasn't anything for Defense Against the Dark Arts beyond reading up on the Unforgivable Curses. Regulus felt like he was already knowledgeable enough about the topic without doing additional research.

Surprisingly, the class he had the most work for was Divination. They were studying Oneiromancy, a form of divination that involved prophetic dreams, and Regulus was already two weeks behind on keeping a dream journal. Harry read a few of his entries to Regulus while Ron and Hermione listened in, each of them doing their best to hold back laughter at Harry's ridiculous, made-up predictions.

Regulus didn't usually remember his dreams, and given that he had been unconscious for more than a fortnight, he didn't have much to work off of. He idly wondered if he could use his hallucinations of James as fodder for the dream journal, but he thought that might be pushing his luck a little. Whether or not Trelawney was a fraud, he still felt like she was capable of figuring out that he wasn't who he claimed to be, and having dreams about Harry Potter's dead dad was probably not the best way to protect his secret.

Ron joked with them about making up his own predictions, but Regulus could tell that he was lying. He was clearly very into Divination and Luna, when she was around, was always asking him about it and encouraging him, but the derisive scoffs Hermione made every time the subject was brought up were obviously bothering him. Regulus would have to figure out a way to fix that issue.

After Luna's suggestion that Ron try to use Divination to figure out who would be competing in the Triwizard Tournament, Regulus witnessed him use five different methods, all with an increased pensiveness that was starting to make Regulus nervous. When Regulus asked what he had seen, Ron shrugged his shoulders and changed the subject without answering.

He saw Moody for the first time two days after he arrived. Regulus had never actually encountered the man in person, though he had heard stories about him from other Death Eaters during his first life. Moody had known Barty's father, though he strongly disliked him. This endeared Moody to Barty despite their placements on opposite sides of a war. That is until Evan's untimely and violent death.

So Regulus had heard about him, certainly, but seeing the man in real life was another thing altogether. He had an air around him that made Regulus distinctly uncomfortable, though he couldn't articulate why. His magical eye was horrifying to look at, the way it swiveled around as if it had a mind of its own made Regulus feel vaguely ill.

It didn't help that Moody seemed especially interested in Regulus. He came hobbling into the Great Hall for lunch on Friday and slowed significantly when his possessed eye landed on Regulus's face. Regulus was mid-swallow when he noticed the ex-Auror, and he nearly choked on his food when they made eye contact.

Moody looked oddly surprised to see Regulus, though his face immediately fell into a scowl a moment later. Regulus thought he might stop to talk to them, but he kept walking passed, though at a glacial pace. Regulus noticed him speaking to McGonagall a bit later, and he could see that both professors were unsubtly glancing over at him.

Through the weekend, Regulus caught Moody watching him several times. The weather was still nice so he and his friends were spending most of their time outdoors trying to soak in the sun, but Regulus would still spy Moody tottering around the grounds, his eyes always glued to Regulus. Even when Regulus would make direct eye contact, Moody didn't always look away.

Late Sunday night once the common room was empty, Harry pulled out the mirror to call Sirius.

"Sirius. Sirius!" Harry called. Regulus cast a subtle silencing charm around them, so they wouldn't draw too much attention.

"Harry?" Remus said, his voice scratchy like he had been asleep. His face materialized on the other side of the mirror. The hair on one side of his head was stuck up at odd angles and heavy bags hung beneath his eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's fine. Where is Sirius?" Harry asked cheerfully. Regulus could tell that Remus tried to hide it, but there was a quick cringe and eye roll upon hearing Sirius's name.

"One moment," Remus mumbled before setting the mirror down.

"He didn't look too good," Harry said, sounding a little awkward, once they were alone again. Regulus nodded in agreement, though he wasn't sure what else to say. He wondered what was going on with them now that they were finally alone.

"Harry!" Sirius said suddenly, a wide smile on his face, all his teeth brightly on display. It didn't fool Regulus. He could see the stress lines forming at the edges of his brother's eyes.

"Hey, Sirius," Harry said with a grin. They chatted for a few minutes about Harry's week. Originally, Sirius had given him the mirror for emergencies only, but with Regulus still unconscious Harry had taken to calling him twice a day for updates. Now that Regulus was back at school, Sirius had compromised by asking Harry to call him once a week.

It was risky with Sirius still on the run, but Regulus thought it was for the best that they kept in touch. They needed each other, anyone could see that, and the casual updates about school were clearly calming some of the anxiety Sirius was dealing with.

"Has Harry told you about Moody yet?" Regulus asked once their conversation died down.

“Only a bit,” Sirius said. “He was always an odd guy.” Regulus thought that was a little bit kind, all things considered.

“He keeps giving Regulus weird looks,” Harry said. Regulus snapped his head over to look at him.

“What?” Regulus and Sirius said at the same time.

“You haven't noticed?” Harry asked Regulus with a disbelieving look.

“Of course, I’ve noticed,” Regulus defended. “I just hadn’t realized that you noticed.”

“Why is Moody giving Regulus weird looks?” Remus asked, clearly trying to get them back on track.

“I don’t know,” Regulus answered honestly. “Did either of you know him?”

“Vaguely,” Sirius said. “During the first war, he was a member of the Order. He was always intense.”

“Yeah, I met him a few times,” Remus added. “I don’t think he ever trusted me though. He was always suspicious of me.”

“I think he was just like that,” Sirius said quickly, though there was a stark look of guilt on his face for some reason. “He never trusted anyone.”

“Do you think Dumbledore told him who you are?” Harry asked after a beat of silence.

“I doubt it,” Regulus said, though he couldn’t be completely sure. “Moody doesn’t seem right in the head.”

That effectively ended that conversation. Regulus wanted to bring up the teaching of Unforgivable Curses, but he also didn’t want Sirius to overreact. Harry was right to be worried about him. Regulus could tell just from the few minutes through the mirror that he was struggling to keep himself under control.

Later that night, Regulus found himself wondering if James had ever known Moody and what he would have to say. He wished he could ask him, the real him, not the weird hallucination that was following him around. As the night dragged on and sleep continued to evade Regulus, he wished he could at least talk to the hallucination version so he could have some company, but apparently, that wasn’t how things worked.

He tried to think about him and even whispered into the silent dorm room, calling out for him. When that didn’t work, he walked downstairs into the common room and tried again, hoping that now that he was alone James would turn up, but he never did. Regulus curled up in an armchair near the dying fire waiting and eventually fell asleep. When he woke up a few hours later as the sun began to rise, a warm blanket had been tucked around him, though he had no idea who had done it.

Regulus had his first class with Moody the next week. He felt strangely nervous walking into the classroom, but he did his best to shake it off, following Harry so they could sit next to each other. Ron was nearly bouncing in his seat with excitement, as were several of the other Gryffindor boys. Neville looked like he might get sick at any moment, and Hermione kept shooting him uncertain looks.

When Moody stomped his way in and announced to the class that he would be putting them under the Imperius Curse to demonstrate its effects, Regulus's mouth hung open in shock.

"But you said it was illegal, Professor," Hermione chimed in right away. Her voice was uncertain and a little shaky. Regulus admired her bravery. Moody, who up until that moment had his eyes glued to Regulus's face, swung his magical eye over to look at her.

"Dumbledore wants you to know what it feels like," Moody said gruffly. "If you'd rather learn the hard way — "

"Dumbledore wants you to do this?" Regulus demanded, not even realizing that he was about to speak until the words were out of his mouth.

"You don't need to stay if you're against learning it," Moody replied immediately. Regulus didn't respond, he wasn't about to leave the rest of them alone in the classroom, but he would definitely be following up with Dumbledore after the fact.

Moody carried on with the lesson, though Regulus could see his magical eye glancing over at him repeatedly as he cast the curse on several different students. None of them seemed to be able to fight it off, but that was hardly surprising. Regulus wasn't sure that he had ever known anyone who could throw off the curse, even when it was cast by someone inexperienced.

The way the Imperius Curse worked was very different from its sister curse, *crucio* . Rather than removing all ability to think and forcing someone to do anything within their power to remove the curse, *imperio* made it so the person affected by it wanted to keep the spell on for as long as possible. Fighting against it was like trying to fight off a sleeping draught, it pulled you under in a way that was comforting, soft, and easy. It's why people under the curse seemed so relaxed because any worries someone might have were removed by the curse, all choice and decision-making were taken away.

Regulus found it especially hard because he always felt like he was trying to fight off his own worries, trying to bury them or escape them. Being under the Imperius Curse was like taking muggle drugs, something he had never done but had watched more adventurous Slytherins do. He felt a freedom that he never once experienced in his regular life. Needless to say, he was extremely worried about Moody casting the curse on him.

He watched him cast it on Dean, then Lavender, then Neville, each without issue. Harry was next and Regulus clenched his hands into fists, shaking slightly as he watched Harry walk up to the front of the classroom to endure an Unforgivable that he shouldn't even know the name of.

“*Imperio*,” Mood said loudly. Harry’s eyes went vague and unfocused in the way the others had. Regulus had to look away, the look on Harry’s face making him feel sick. He didn’t look back until he heard the sound of a desk being knocked to the ground.

“Now, that’s more like it!” Moody growled with what sounded like a mixture of excitement and annoyance.

Harry had managed to fight it off. Regulus had no idea how he did it, but he had shaken off the curse. Regulus breathed a sigh of relief that had been caught in his chest since the moment he entered the classroom.

“Very good, Potter, very good indeed!” Moody shouted. There was something about him that felt so familiar, something in the way he yelled, like chaos lived right below the surface of his skin. Regulus couldn’t put his finger on it though. He was appropriately distracted when Moody decided to cast the Imperius Curse again on Harry.

It wasn’t good to have the curse cast on you, Regulus knew that very well. It deteriorated someone’s brain over time. Usually, if it was just a small thing, then someone might not feel the long-term effects, but if someone was under the curse for months or years, then they would begin to lose parts of themselves. Surely Moody knew about the risks, he was an Auror after all, so why was he risking Harry’s health like this?

He cast the curse on Harry a total of four times, each time Harry throwing it off a little bit faster before he finally moved on.

“Black, you next,” Moody snapped, the trademark growl fading from his voice as he spoke. Regulus stood up and walked to the front of the classroom, still thinking about Harry. He would need to check in with him after the class was over, maybe go to Pomfrey to see if she could make one of the potions known for helping fight the aftereffects of the curse. His thoughts were stuck on that when Moody cast the spell.

The effect was immediate.

The last time Regulus had been under the curse it was because of Barty. Regulus had experienced the curse many times when he was a child, both of his parents using it freely when they needed him or Sirius to behave. It was never kept on them for very long, they were always worried about damaging their heirs too publicly.

Regulus could still remember the stories about Cygnus, his uncle, keeping his cousin Bellatrix under the curse for an entire year when she was only eight years old. It was a “secret” in the family, though of course, they all knew about it. Bellatrix never quite recovered from the effects, the damage done by that year turning out to be irreversible.

Barty never used the curse on Regulus until after Evan died, but he had lost his, albeit faulty, moral compass and had started using Unforgivables like they were the only spells he knew. His Imperius was different than either of Regulus’s parents’ were.

Walburga’s Imperius was always slightly painful. Regulus thought it might because of how much she used the Cruciatus Curse, as if the curse could never quite leave her wand, like

little bits of dark magic would seep through every single time she cast a spell. It was still relaxing to have, but there was an itch to it like being bitten by a bug, a small little stinging sensation.

Orion's Imperius always fell right to the back of Regulus's mind. When he was little, he thought it was because his father wasn't very good at casting the spell, but when he was older he realized it was actually because his father was far more skilled with the curse than his mother. He could cast it in a way where someone wouldn't know to fight, even if they had the capability. It was insidious. The instructions would come from the back of Regulus's thoughts as if he had come up with them himself.

Barty's, on the other hand, was like being swept up in a hurricane. It was still unavoidable and inescapable, at least for Regulus, but it was also clear the moment it was removed that the Imperius Curse had been present.

Regulus had watched Barty cast it on wizards and muggles several times, but it wasn't until after one particularly difficult raid that Barty cast it on him. Regulus had wanted to go home, he was filthy, covered in ash and dirt after several other Death Eaters decided to burn down a handful of empty houses, and he just wanted to shower and sleep.

Barty, however, was feeling rowdy and energetic and wanted Regulus to stay over. When Regulus finally put his foot down, telling Barty firmly that he was going home and would see him tomorrow, Barty cast *imperio* on him the moment his back was turned. Regulus wasn't worried in the moment, too swept up in Hurricane Barty to think about it, but later he had the wherewithal to realize how much danger he had been in.

Barty just ended up making him stay and get drunk, eventually removing the curse an hour later when he felt like Regulus was too tipsy to leave safely and more willing to stay and spend time together. Regulus still left the moment Barty was passed out, drool pooling out of his mouth as he slept on the parlor floor. That was only a few days before Regulus really cut ties with the man.

Moody's Imperius was a lot like Barty's, though both more controlled and more emotional at the same time. There was a precision to it that Barty hadn't had in his early twenties, that he would never have now that he was dead. It no doubt came from years of practice and had Regulus had the capability, he would have been unsettled by the thought. It was more emotional because there was anger and vindictiveness to it.

Pretend to be a cat . Regulus dropped immediately to his hands and knees, not a single thought entering his mind. It was as easy as falling asleep.

Regulus was pretty sure that he was crawling around on the ground meowing, but his thoughts were too disconnected to really think about it. It didn't matter much what he was doing. It's not like he really cared what happened to him.

Regulus was barely alive, experiencing a life that was never meant for him, he was meant to be decomposing at the bottom of a lake inside of a cursed cave. He had no claim on his new life, he had no connection to it. He wasn't needed, everything would work itself out without

him here. He had felt such guilt for stealing this second life, but he didn't need to. He could let go.

"This isn't how I imagined I would feel watching you pretend to be a cat," James said suddenly. Regulus gazed at him impassibly. James's mouth was turned down into a frustrated frown, his eyes distinctly unhappy.

Regulus meowed at him. He thought that he might have been trying to say something, but he couldn't use words when he was pretending to be a cat. James's frown deepened even further, and Regulus watched as he looked between him and someone else, as if he was trying to come to a decision about something. Regulus didn't much care what it was about. He meowed up at him again.

"Who is he looking at?" he heard someone whisper.

James finally looked down at him again before slowly crouching in front of him, his eyes focused and burning in a way that Regulus hadn't seen in a long time. He reached a hand out as if to touch him, though it stopped a few inches from Regulus's face.

James took a deep breath. "I wonder if I just," James muttered before finally letting his fingers brush the side of Regulus's temple.

One second Regulus was pretending to be a cat and the next he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

my updates are a little irregular right now, but please follow me on tumblr for exact updates: [maladaptivewriting](https://maladaptivewriting.tumblr.com/). You can also follow me on tiktok under the same username.

the skrewts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Someone was slapping him in the face, which Regulus thought was both rude and oddly hilarious. He had never found being slapped in the fact hilarious before but suddenly he felt a little laugh spilling out of his mouth. The person slapped him again. Not very hard, just a small thwack across his skin, a sting spreading across his cheek. It took him a moment to realize his eyes were closed.

“James?” he said once he finally managed to open his eyes. They were still unfocused a bit, but he could tell that he was laying on the ground and that James was hovering over him. James laughed a little, sounding supremely uncomfortable for a second.

“James?” another voice repeated. Regulus looked over to see Moody half crouched looking intently at his face.

“He calls me that sometimes,” Harry said with an awkward chuckle. Right, Harry, of course. “Cause it’s my middle name.”

“And you call him by his middle name, do you?” Moody asked, giving Harry a piercing look. Harry shrugged a little, looking like a trapped animal, before turning his attention back on Regulus.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked. Regulus could see the line of tension marring his forehead.

“Fine,” Regulus said, pushing himself up so that he was sitting. “What happened?”

“You were crawling around and meowing like a cat, staring up at the ceiling or something, and then you just passed out,” Ron said, his face a mixture of laughter and concern.

“We thought you were talking to someone,” Harry said quietly, giving him a complicated look.

“Never seen someone collapse because of the Imperius Curse,” Moody said gruffly. “Guess this is just a class of oddballs. Let’s go again.”

“No!” Harry nearly shouted. “I mean, no, I think I should take Regulus to the Hospital Wing.”

“I’m sure Mr. Black can take it,” Moody disagreed. “Back to your seat, Mr. Potter.” Harry looked mutinous for a second.

“It’s fine,” Regulus said quietly. Harry reluctantly walked to his seat. Regulus pushed himself up to his feet and tried to shake off the feeling of disconcertment. Moody was watching him closely, giving him a very strange look.

“ *Imperio* ,” Moody said. Regulus didn’t even have a moment to feel the effects of the spell before he was gone, lying unconscious on the classroom floor once again. Harry put his foot down this time. The moment Regulus opened his eyes, Harry was dragging him out of the classroom toward the Hospital Wing.

“I think it’s okay, Harry,” Regulus said with a chuckle.

“You don’t know that,” Harry said seriously. Regulus rolled his eyes good-naturedly at the boy, he was such a worrier, just like his father.

“How are you feeling?” Regulus asked Harry quietly as they walked.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, confusedly. Harry had finally stopped dragging Regulus, and if Regulus had to guess, was feeling more relaxed now that they were no longer in Moody’s presence.

“It’s not good for you to have the Imperius Curse cast over and over again like that,” Regulus said.

“Oh,” Harry mumbled, looking focused for a moment like he was searching his feelings. “I do have a bit of a headache, but I’m sure it’s nothing.” Regulus nodded instantly.

“I’ll catch up with you,” Regulus said, peeling off from him.

“What about the Hospital Wing?” Harry called after him.

“Don’t worry about it,” Regulus said, throwing the words over his shoulder. “I’ll meet you at lunch.” He could see Harry throw his arms up in defeat, but Regulus was a man on a mission now, and Harry no doubt already knew that he couldn’t stop him.

He had already decided to get Harry a dose of Comfrey’s draught after watching Moody cast the Imperius Curse on the boy, but hearing he had a headache just convinced him more. He had originally planned to go to Pomfrey, but now that he was out of class another idea came to him. He could kill two birds with one stone.

Comfrey’s draught was used to fight the effects of the Imperius Curse, but it wasn’t perfect and it needed to be taken pretty quickly after enduring the curse to work. Pomfrey, while a skilled healer, wasn’t a Potions Master. It would be better if Regulus went right to the source.

Regulus remembered Sirius reading about the draught when they were children, telling him the disturbing tale of Bernard Comfrey, who had set out to cure the aftereffects using a thistle-based potion, intending to create a draught based around the ground effects found in the plant.

Comfrey, while ultimately successful in creating the potion, destroyed his life in the process of developing the potion. He was the first person to discover the addictive effects of the Imperius Curse, and while testing different iterations of the potion, he would have someone cast the curse on him repeatedly, causing him to develop a debilitating addiction to it. Sirius, of course, thought this terrible fact was something meant to be shared, a malicious little smile

on his face as he recounted the damage done to Bellatrix. Sirius had never liked their cousin, not that Regulus could blame him exactly. It always just made Regulus feel sad hearing about it though.

As he made his way through the castle, he couldn't help thinking about the vindictiveness in Moody's Imperius. He shouldn't have a reason to hate Regulus, right? But then again, the way he treated Draco indicated otherwise. Hearing about Moody turning Draco into a ferret and taunting the child made Regulus uncomfortable. He wondered if Moody hated Draco because his Death Eater father was able to slither his way out of punishment for his crimes. It would make sense for an ex-Auror.

Maybe Moody hated Regulus for the same reason. Regulus did technically have a Death Eater father himself, one who was currently evading punishment. There was no way Moody could know that Sirius was innocent, the entire world still thought he was guilty, and on the run, so why would Moody think any different?

It felt so unfair that a professor would target students because of who their parents were, it's not like they could help it.

Speaking of which...

"Hello, Severus," Regulus said, barging into Snape's office the moment he saw the man enter the room, following him through the door that hadn't yet closed.

"Black," Snape said with a sigh, sounding as if he had been expecting Regulus to come to speak with him.

"We need to talk," Regulus said. There was an uncomfortable bubbling of rage inside him, he felt like he wanted to scream and rave at the man, like he wanted to start spitting out insults. He didn't know where the feeling came from. While Snape made him angry, he wasn't usually one to attack someone that way. He might be a Gryffindor in this life, but he liked to think he had at least a little self-control.

Besides, it wasn't the right way to deal with a man like Severus. If Regulus were to start yelling, then Severus would no doubt just yell right back, and they would get nowhere. Yet Regulus couldn't shake the urge to scream. He had to work to swallow it down. It felt like he was fighting for control like he was riding on the tail end of a broom with someone else driving.

"About?" Snape prompted when Regulus didn't continue right away.

"I need a dose of Comfrey's draught," Regulus said.

"Go to Pomfrey, then," Snape said with a sneer. Regulus felt the wave of fiery anger for a second, but he took a deep breath and tried to fortify himself.

"You know," Regulus said, finally wrestling the feelings of anger down far enough that he felt like he could manage this conversation. "I always hated Potions."

Snape turned away from him to mess with something on his desk like this conversation was below him.

“Do you know why I hated Potions?” Regulus asked blandly. Snape didn’t respond, but Regulus knew he was listening. “Because of Slughorn. He was always interested in the Black family, you know? He couldn’t get at Sirius, not really, with him being sorted in Gryffindor and all, but he could get to me. Every single time I was in that classroom, he was always trying to talk to me, always trying to get me on his side. I hated it.”

“Is there a point to this?” Snape drawled, finally turning back around to look at Regulus.

“Have you ever known me not to have a point?” Regulus asked instantly. He and Snape might not have been friends during his first life, but they did know each other and surely Snape hadn’t forgotten that much. “You were always good at Potions though, weren’t you? Even without Slughorn’s unwanted attention.”

“I didn’t need Slughorn to teach me about Potions,” Snape said in response. It was obviously meant to be an insult, but it was exactly the in Regulus needed.

“And yet, somehow, none of your students are even remotely competent in the subject,” Regulus said lazily. Snape’s sharp eyes snapped to his.

“It’s not my — ”

“Slughorn couldn’t teach to save his life,” Regulus interrupted. “Half of his students couldn’t even pass their O.W.L.s and the other half had to teach themselves. I would have thought you, one of the few students who excelled in the class, wouldn’t have repeated the same mistakes.”

Snape opened his mouth, his face twisted furiously.

“Except you are somehow worse,” Regulus continued before Snape could speak. “You’re so caught up in your silly vendetta against a dead man that you can’t see how blundering you seem.”

“These students — ”

“They’re kids,” Regulus snapped, the anger from earlier fighting its way back to the surface again. “They don’t know anything. At least Harry I understand. He doesn’t deserve it, but I understand why you might be focused on him. James was awful to you, not that you weren’t just as terrible to him. But Neville?”

“Longbottom is — ”

“Dumbledore might not care that you’re terrible at your job, but you know who I am now and I’m not just going to let you act like this. Not anymore,” Regulus said. Snape glared at him so fiercely that Regulus started to wonder if he would just start throwing curses at any moment. “Besides,” Regulus added, “we have bigger issues.”

“And what’s that?” Regulus could see the way the words escaped Snape, it was clear that he didn’t want to ask, that he didn’t want to seem invested in whatever Regulus was about to say.

“Moody,” Regulus said. Something flashed behind Snape’s eyes, some indecipherable emotion, but it came and went so fast that Regulus had no hope of interpreting it.

“What about him?” Snape asked, through clenched teeth.

“There is something wrong with him,” Regulus said simply.

“What makes you say that?” Snape asked carefully, but Regulus could see the keen interest now. He no doubt had Snape’s full undivided attention.

“He’s casting Unforgivables on students,” Regulus said simply, not bothering to clarify which of the three curses Moody was using. Snape’s eyebrows raised slightly.

“That’s why you want the draught,” Snape said. It wasn’t a question, not exactly, but there was a curiosity behind it.

“Yes,” Regulus said, not bothering to specify that it was Harry specifically that needed it. He didn’t think that would get him very far.

“Dumbledore asked him to come to teach because of the Tournament,” Snape said, answering an unspoken question Regulus had. Regulus counted it as a win that he was being even moderately helpful.

“We’ve had some bad Defense teachers,” Regulus muttered, “but this seems over the top. I heard about what he did to Draco.” Snape’s face softened almost imperceptibly, before hardening in anger at the memory of Moody’s Transfiguration-based punishment. “I think he has issues with students whose parents are Death Eaters.”

Snape gave him an uncomfortably perceptive look. “He has a problem with you, doesn’t he?”

Regulus shrugged. “I can handle it,” Regulus defended. “But I doubt Draco will do well with Moody targeting him all year.”

Snape sighed, his shoulder lowering in defeat. “I’ll talk to Dumbledore,” Snape finally conceded.

Regulus nodded. “And the potion?”

Snape gave him a long, silent look. “I’ll make it today. The Slytherins are going to need it after their class as well.”

“Good,” Regulus said. “And if I find you’re targeting Neville — ”

“I’ll handle it,” Snape snapped, though there was a thoughtful look on his face.

Regulus left his office shortly after that, feeling far more settled than he was before. He would have never expected to find an ally in Severus Snape, but he knew appealing to his need to prove how intelligent he was, and his desire to protect Draco and the other Slytherins, would be the best route.

Despite this conclusion, he began to feel that overwhelming anger seeping in the farther away he walked from Snape's office. He wanted to go back in there and start yelling again. They had reached some understanding, Regulus thought, so why did he feel like this? He tried to parse through his thoughts, but his emotions had no starting point, at least not one he could easily find.

Lunch was still being served, but he felt off and didn't want to bother going to the Great Hall, especially if there was a risk of seeing Moody. He decided to head back to the dorm before he had to head out to Care of Magical Creatures. He had only just closed the dorm door behind him when he fell to his hands and knees.

The feeling inside him was difficult to describe, but it felt almost like a piece of him was ripping apart, like someone was reaching into his soul and tearing it in two. He grunted uncomfortably, squeezing his eyes shut against the feeling. It wasn't pain exactly, at least not in the traditional sense, but he still screamed when the ripping sensation swelled. A moment later, it stopped.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," someone was mumbling. Regulus was still breathing heavily, trying to get his body back under control. "I didn't know how to separate, I was just trying to help. I'm sorry, are you okay?" the person babbled.

"What was that?" Regulus asked in a stilted voice.

"I'm so sorry, Reg. I'm sorry." Regulus looked up to find James kneeling in front of him, his face twisted with worry. "I just wanted to help you fight off the Imperius Curse. I didn't realize it would... I'm not really sure what happened actually."

Regulus shook his head to clear it and settled back to sit on his feet. "You were able to fight off the Imperius Curse?" Regulus muttered questioningly.

"Well, I never had anyone cast it on me," James answered. "So I don't know."

"Lucky you," Regulus said, finally climbing to his feet, pointedly ignoring the upset look that crossed James's face. "What did you do then?"

"I'm not sure," James said with a shrug. "I just felt like... if I could be there, I could help." Regulus stared at him in silence for a long moment.

"That makes no sense," Regulus responded. James shrugged again, looking oddly like Harry when he was feeling uncomfortable.

"There is something wrong with Moody," James said suddenly, speaking the words like he might be overheard.

“Yes, that much is clear,” Regulus replied with a solid nod.

“No, you don’t understand,” James began to say but was cut off when the door to the dorm opened. Harry, Ron, and the other boys came barreling into the room.

“Were you talking to someone?” Harry asked, he sounded like he was purposefully keeping his voice light.

“No,” Regulus said quickly.

“You missed lunch,” Ron said, shoving a poorly wrapped sandwich into Regulus’s hands.

“Thanks,” Regulus muttered. Harry was still looking at him with something akin to suspicion, but Regulus wasn’t sure what to make of it, and he didn’t intend to ask for clarification if he could help it.

James disappeared the moment Regulus’s back was turned, so when he spun back around the room was empty. The memory weighed on him though. What had actually happened to cause him to black out when James touched him? It wasn’t possible that James was real, was it? Surely not. All ghosts Regulus had known could be seen by everyone, not just one specific person. He had never heard of that happening. He resolved to look into it when he had the time.

They walked down to Care of Magical Creatures together a bit later. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all suspiciously quiet about what animals they had been learning about, and it was making Regulus nervous. Hagrid gave him a big smile when he arrived before gesturing over toward several crates filled with what looked like crabs.

There were so many of them in each crate that they were crawling all over each other and shaking the sides of the boxes as they bumped into the walls. It was upon closer inspection that he realized they were not crabs, but instead some weird bastardized version of a crab. They were about ten inches long and looked like pale double-ended scorpions. The smell of sulfur and rotting fish permeated the area.

“What are those?” Regulus asked, a cringe etched on his face.

“They are Blast-Ended Skrewts,” Harry said, clearly trying to hold in a laugh. Regulus gave him an incredulous look. “They’re a hybrid that Hagrid created.”

“Made of Manticores and Fire Crabs,” Hagrid said proudly. Regulus had to consciously keep himself from vomiting.

“They were six inches long when we started school,” Hermione said, an unhappy look on her face. That was an unusually fast growth rate, Regulus noted disturbingly.

Hagrid was beyond excited about the growth, Regulus discovered, and talked at length about it during class. He was delighted by the way the project was proceeding and suggested that they each make time to come down to his hut to observe the skrewts’ extraordinary behavior.

“I will not,” Draco said flatly, “I see enough of these foul things during lessons, thanks.” Regulus didn’t catch Hagrid’s response, he was too distracted by the way the skrewts seemed to scurry away from Draco when he got too close to the side of their box. Regulus didn’t know if the headless creatures were capable of experiencing fear, but he guessed it was some kind of animal response that they were having. He didn’t understand what about Draco was triggering it though.

In the entrance hall later they saw the posting for the Triwizard Tournament, telling them that the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang would be arriving Friday the 30th of October. It was a little over a month away, but students were already buzzing about it. Regulus was reluctantly excited, he had to admit, though there were still so many unknowns making him nervous.

“I wonder if Cedric knows? Think I’ll go tell him,” one of the Hufflepuffs muttered before wandering off.

“Cedric?” Ron asked, an odd tilt to his voice.

“Diggory,” Harry clarified. “He’s planning to enter the tournament.”

“How do you know that?” Regulus asked, watching as a light blush spread across Harry’s face.

“He told me,” Harry mumbled, sounding a bit unwilling to say the words.

Regulus shook his head, doing his best not to roll his eyes. It wasn’t Harry’s fault that he had a crush on the Hufflepuff boy, it seemed like half the students had crushes on him these days, but Regulus still wasn’t fond of him.

“That idiot, Hogwarts champion?” Ron asked with a small chuckle, escaping the conversation quickly as he charged into the Great Hall for dinner.

The school was buzzing with the news, and it was all anyone would talk about over the next few days. The twins were apparently trying to figure out a way to enter, but without prior knowledge of how they would check ages, they were at a loss for how to plan.

Harry asked him quietly one night if he was planning to enter since he was well over seventeen, and Regulus nearly cried from laughter, before telling him, “No, Harry, only idiots would enter that Tournament.” Harry laughed along, agreeing with him. Regulus guessed that Harry had to deal with enough attention as it was. He was glad the age limit was set to seventeen though, there was no chance Harry would be forced to compete.

Chapter End Notes

follow me on tumblr for exact updates: [maladaptivewriting](https://maladaptivewriting.tumblr.com/). You can also follow me on tiktok under the same username.

the novels.

Chapter Notes

this chapter is several days late because everything has been breaking in my apartment this week and it has been a huge mess.

this chapter is a bit of an interlude to the story before we really get into the action of fourth year, but i hope you enjoy it nonetheless.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus wasn't sure what he expected Snape to do after their conversation. Snape hadn't ever been very receptive to others, at least during Regulus's first life, and he didn't expect Snape to be very receptive now.

He kept thinking about how funny it would be if Snape showed up to class acting like a kindly old woman, treating everyone to baked goods and forehead kisses. Of course, that image made for a ridiculous thought, but, if Regulus was honest with himself, he didn't think that Snape was going to change at all. Regulus was already planning how he would double down on his earlier statements and vague threats when Snape continued to treat his students badly.

However, Snape did change. Not a lot and not all at once, but the next time they had his class he seemed much more neutral than before. He didn't attack any Gryffindors or vanish anyone's potion when they didn't do a good enough job. Draco was being his usual loud and obnoxious self, and Snape actually chastised him. Though he didn't take any points away like he would have if it wasn't a Slytherin, Regulus still thought it was growth.

The most surprising thing was when the class ended, and Snape asked Neville to stay behind. Neville swallowed so loudly that everyone in the class could hear it. Draco and the other Slytherins all snickered at the boy, but the Gryffindors were just giving him looks of sympathy. Regulus gave Snape a stern look, but Snape was pointedly ignoring him. He decided to wait nearby to check in with Neville once he was done.

It took Neville nearly half an hour to leave Snape's classroom, cutting well into their lunchtime. Harry, Hermione, and Ron had offered to stay behind with him, but he just waved them off. He wanted the freedom to talk to Snape if he had to, and he didn't think it would set a good precedent if he did it in front of the others. He wasn't sure how he expected Neville to look when he left Snape's classroom, perhaps in tears or enraged, but regardless it was definitely not with a huge smile on his face.

"Hey, Regulus," Neville said cheerfully. "Sorry, were you waiting to talk to Snape?"

"No," Regulus said. "I was waiting for you. What did Snape want?"

“Oh,” Neville said, looking oddly touched that Regulus would wait for him. “It was the strangest thing. I thought he was going to poison me or something, but instead, he gave me this.” Neville held out an old potions book, it was well worn and nearly falling apart, but Regulus was still able to make out the title.

“He gave you a book on advanced Herbology in potion making?” Regulus asked, reading the title again to make sure he had it right.

Neville nodded vigorously. “Yeah, I mean, I knew Herbology and Potions had a lot of overlap, obviously plants are used to make potions, but I didn’t realize how many experts have masters in both subjects. Snape said that he was talking to Sprout about my performance in Herbology, and they think I might be able to pursue both.”

“What?” Regulus said, shaking his head to clear it. “But you’re terrible at Potions.” Neville raised an eyebrow at him. “Sorry,” Regulus added, a little embarrassed.

“I am aware of that,” Neville said with a little laugh. “Or at least, I *was* aware of that.” He laughed again, the wide smile still plastered on his face. “Snape said,” Neville whispered, looking around like someone might be listening in, “that he was trying to push me cause he thinks I’m one of the only ones in the class that might actually be good enough to get a Mastery in Potions.”

“Wow,” Regulus said loudly. Neville shushed him.

“I’m not supposed to tell anyone,” Neville said. “So don’t mention it to him. But he actually... apologized.”

“Apologized?” Regulus asked.

“I know,” Neville said with a nod.

“That’s great, Neville,” Regulus said after a beat, still trying to process what Neville was saying. “I’m — Well, I’m surprised.”

“You’re telling me,” Neville said, but he wasn’t looking at Regulus anymore. He was clearly getting distracted by the new book in his hands, so Regulus let him go. He wanted to go in and ask Snape if he meant what he said, but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

Many of the tutors he had as a child would be harder on Sirius or himself in subjects they were already good at, trying to encourage them to get even better. Usually, if a tutor had no comments about their performance in a subject, it meant they weren’t very good. He decided not to bring it up with Snape, he would keep an eye on him and Neville, but for now, he was pleasantly surprised.

Ron was asking Neville what was going on at lunch, but Neville just gave him a vague answer and went back to eating. Ron shared a look with Regulus, but Regulus could only shrug. He didn’t fully understand it either.

Snape, it turned out, was far more helpful than Regulus would have thought, because the next time he went to Defense Against the Dark Arts, Moody had decided to stop casting Unforgivable Curses on the students. Regulus breathed a sigh of relief the moment he heard it, even if Moody followed it up with a vague threat to the students.

“You better stay aware though, I might cast it on anyone at any time. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” he said so loudly that half the class nearly jumped out of their chairs. Regulus thought it was mostly an empty threat. Or at least he hoped it was.

Regulus visited Snape the evening after Defense, and Snape let him in without even bothering to complain.

“Moody has moved on from casting the Imperius Curse,” Regulus said, taking a seat in the chair across from Snape’s desk.

“I told Dumbledore about it,” Snape said simply, watching Regulus with only a vague look of annoyance.

“And?” Regulus prompted. Talking to Snape was like de-gnoming a garden, tedious and exhausting.

“He seemed surprised and said he would talk to him, but he defended him regardless. Said he was a good Auror, but that he just had an odd way of teaching,” Snape said. Regulus thought about it for a moment before responding, trying to mull the words over carefully, looking for anything he might have missed.

“I don’t think Dumbledore is a very good Headmaster,” Regulus muttered, settling on the simplest fact. Snape, to his surprise, laughed, though only for a moment.

“You’re probably right,” Snape agreed solemnly. Regulus could tell that Snape was waiting for him to bring up the thing with Neville, but of course, he never did.

After that things calmed down a bit, but Regulus knew the worse had yet to come. They had a few weeks of normal classes before the students from the other schools finally arrived. James didn’t show up again, which Regulus was chagrined to admit he was disappointed by. It was pathetic to be so attached to a figment of his imagination.

Regulus had a lot of reading to catch up on for Muggle Studies, but luckily Hermione was there to help him through it. She dropped the course after her hectic third year but still was more knowledgeable than most of his classmates due to her muggle upbringing.

They were beginning to cover things like muggle artwork which Regulus found very fascinating, starting with music. There were several enchanted instruments in the classroom, that Burbage informed them muggles played by hand. He thought back to all the t-shirts he had found in Sirius’s old bedroom and wondered if he would get extra credit if he brought them. Their professor also began assigning muggle fiction that they would be discussing at the end of term.

“Now,” Professor Burbage, “your assignment for next class is to read this novel. I don’t expect you to finish it in one week, but you should make significant headway before our next meeting. You can’t read it all in one night. Do not procrastinate.”

She flicked her wand and a stack of novels began floating down the aisles, dispensing one on each desk. They all looked like they had been read many times, some of their covers were distorted from wear and tear. Regulus grabbed his before it could reach his desktop, flipping through the first couple of pages.

“ *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is one of the most popular muggle novels ever written. It is a very enjoyable read,” she said cheerfully.

Burbage was a dirty liar. *Great Expectations* was not only not enjoyable, but was in fact the most boring book Regulus had ever been forced to read, and he had read a lot of boring books in his life. If Dickens had still been alive, Regulus would fly to his house and *Avada Kedavra* him. He kept trying to pull it out in between classes and every time would find his eyelids growing droopy.

“Hey,” Hermione said, elbowing him for the third time in an hour. “Didn’t sleep well?”

“No, I slept fine,” Regulus said. “This book is going to be the death of me.”

“Oh, what are you reading?” Hermione said, tilting her head around to look at the cover. “I quite liked that book, but it is a bit dull at times.” Regulus looked at her with surprise and she laughed quietly. “I am fully capable of admitting when something is boring.” She eyed Ron, who sat across them in the library, his head flat against the table as he snored softly. “To you anyway,” she added.

“Want to just tell me what happens?” Regulus said with a hopeful smile. Hermione shook her head.

“No,” she said with another laugh. “I can’t wait to hear your thoughts.”

“Maybe muggle books just aren’t for me,” Regulus muttered as he reopened the book. Hermione gave him a judgmental look, and he promptly shut his mouth.

A few days after that she set a book down in front of him as he was eating breakfast. Regulus had just emptied his plate, taking his last bite of food, when the book clattered on his plate.

“Try this one,” Hermione said cheerfully. “It was one of my favorites, I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“ *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott,” Regulus mumbled, picking up the book curiously.

“Yep,” Hermione said, “it was published in the same decade as *Great Expectations*, but it’s a lot more fun to read.” Regulus gave her an uncertain look, but she just elbowed him good-naturedly.

“All right,” Regulus conceded. “I’ll give it a try.”

That was how Lavender found him, sitting in the Gryffindor common room, *Great Expectations* abandoned on his lap while his nose was tucked into *Little Women* .

“ *Little Women* ? Isn’t that a kids’ book?” Lavender asked. Regulus wasn’t sure that Lavender had ever spoken to him, and he was more than a little confused as to why she was doing it now. Parvati was standing a few feet away looking just as perplexed.

He shrugged. “I don’t actually know,” Regulus said. “I’ve never read a muggle book before.”

“Well,” Lavender said with a conspiratorial smile, “there are much better books than that one. Parvati, go get *Mackenzie’s Mountain* .” Parvati raised her eyebrows in shock. “Please,” Lavender hissed.

“That’s really all right,” Regulus said, but Parvati was already leaving, skipping up to the dorm room.

“It’s also a muggle book, but it’s *way* more fun,” Lavender said before breaking into giggles. Regulus was about to ask what she meant when Parvati dropped a book on a lap.

“Enjoy,” Parvati said with a laugh. She and Lavender left the common room a moment later, both of them whispering to each other.

Regulus didn’t have time to read the book yet, with the *Great Expectations* and *Little Women* on the docket, but he tucked it away in his bag to read later. *Little Women* was far more enjoyable than Dickens’s book. Regulus found the characters intriguing and easy to read about. If he had to read one more line from Pip the Orphan, he thought he might gouge his eyes out. He didn’t feel that was with *Little Women* , instead, it felt like greeting an old friend.

“I keep turning over new leaves, and spoiling them, as I used to spoil my copybooks,” Regulus read aloud to himself. “And I make so many beginnings there will never be an end.” He hummed quietly to himself, copying down the quote onto a blank piece of parchment.

Hermione was thrilled that he enjoyed the book, letting him keep her copy so that he could reread it. The rest of his classes were much of the same. The Blast-Ended Skrewts continued to grow at an alarming rate, so quickly that Regulus began to have fantasies of sneaking down there in the middle of the night to get rid of them. He didn’t want to hurt Hagrid though. Luna was busy with her new classes, Divination and Runes, so she wasn’t around as much, and when she was, she and Ron were often whispering to each other.

They were let out of classes early the day the other schools arrived so that they could watch them. They all piled out in a huge crowd, wrapping their cloaks tighter around themselves. The Beauxbatons students arrived in a flying carriage pulled by Abraxans, and the Durmstrang students in a magical ship that could fully submerge in water.

The Beauxbatons were first, their headmistress, a hugely tall woman named Madame Maxime easily commanded the attention of the crowd as she stepped out of the carriage. The students behind her were exactly what Regulus expected from the French school. There was a small crowd of boys and girls who emerged from the carriage after Madame Maxime, all of

the shivering against the cold Scottish winds. They were all wearing thin, silky robes that looked very flattering on each of them, but were clearly unprepared for the chilly weather.

Durmstrang was next, their ship emerging menacingly from the Black Lake as all the Hogwarts students watched in awe. Regulus didn't know too much about the schools, but the moment he saw the headmaster, he knew he should have been better prepared for their arrival. He watched in apprehension as Igor Karkaroff stepped onto the bank of the lake.

Regulus didn't know Karkaroff well, he really wasn't very familiar with that many Death Eaters, but he had interacted with Karkaroff more than once. He arrived at one Death Eater meeting, easily towering over most of the other members, talking in a strong Eastern European accent and sneering at anyone who dared to look at him even a moment too long.

Barty was fascinated by him. If Regulus had to guess, he thought Barty might have had a crush on the man, sometimes he had terrible taste, not that Regulus would ever bring this up to his friend. Karkaroff was one of the Death Eaters most interested in torturing muggles. There were several that Regulus met that he was sure were only there because of the free-for-all they could have with torturing and killing. The Dark Lord didn't tend to attract the most upstanding members of society. In retrospect, it should have been a warning sign.

Behind Karkaroff was a crowd of students, including Victor Krum, the Quidditch player Ron was unreasonably obsessed with. He had an intense look on his face and walked at the front of the group of students, standing out as a clear leader. Regulus wondered if he was even young enough to still be in school or if Karkaroff was already cheating.

"Over here! Come and sit over here!" Ron shouted at the group once they all filed into the Great Hall.

"Too late," Harry said, giving Ron a sympathetic smile. Ron shook his head as they watched Krum and the other Durmstrang students sit at the Slytherin table. Draco smiled smugly at Harry, which Harry returned with a glare.

"Yeah, that's right, smarm up to him, Malfoy," Ron said bitterly.

Regulus was so busy watching Ron get flustered when one girl from Beaubaton asked him if they wanted their bouillabaisse that he almost missed the new additions to the professors' table. He didn't recognize one of them, but the other man he would know anywhere. Barty's father, Barty Crouch Sr., was taking a seat at the table.

"What are they doing here?" Harry said, surprised.

"You know who they are?" Regulus asked.

"That's Percy's boss, Mr. Crouch," Harry said, pointing at Barty Crouch Sr., "and that's Lugo Bagman, we met him at the World Cup."

"Oh," Regulus muttered.

“They organized the Tournament, didn’t they?” Hermione said. Regulus was barely listening. He couldn’t believe that he didn’t even think about the prospect of Barty’s father being here.

He wasn’t ever as bad as Orion, but Barty Sr. was definitely not a good man. Regulus was not even surprised that Barty went off the deep end after the way his father shunned and degraded him his entire life. Regulus always felt bad for him, but it wasn’t like they could help each other out of their terrible families. They were no James Potter.

Regulus listened as Dumbledore introduced the new adults and gave them the rundown of how the Tournament would work. Regulus only half paid attention, it wasn’t that relevant to him, he was much more worried about having to deal with Barty Sr. and apparent turncoat Death Eater Karkaroff. With Karkaroff especially, Harry would be in more danger than ever.

“Finally,” Dumbledore continued, “I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract.”

Regulus wasn’t surprised by this information. Any magical event like this would bind someone to it. He wondered how the magical contract would be enforced though. If a champion refused to compete halfway through, what would happen to them? He was distracted by the thought of it, playing out the possibilities in his head.

“Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all.”

“An Age Line!” Fred said, his eyes shining with madness. Regulus rolled his eyes at the boy and his twin. There was no way they were getting passed that line.

They headed toward the exit and arrived at the same moment that Karkaroff did. Harry stopped to let him pass, and Karkaroff walked past him before stopping to slowly look back, staring down at his forehead.

“Yeah, that’s Harry Potter,” Moody said from behind them. The hairs on the back of Regulus’s neck stood on end. He felt like an electric current was flowing through the room, but he couldn’t understand who was generating it.

“You!” Karkaroff said to Moody. Oh right, Regulus thought, Moody was the one to capture Karkaroff.

“Me,” Moody said gruffly. Regulus wasn’t sure why, but he suddenly felt the need to leave the Great Hall as quickly as he could. He grabbed Harry by the arm and pushed passed Karkaroff so that they could head back up to the safety of their dorms. Late that night, Regulus heard the sounds of Harry whispering to Sirius.

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the goblet of fire.

“Anyone put their name in yet?” Ron asked a third-year girl eagerly as they walked down for breakfast the next morning. Regulus hadn’t slept well, he had spent the night tossing, turning, and fending off memories of Barty and his terrible father. He was still fighting the urge to glue himself to Harry’s side so he could protect him from Karkaroff and anyone else who might have it out for the boy, though he was sure Harry would likely not appreciate such behavior.

“Just the Durmstrang students,” the third-year replied, her eyes bright with excitement. “I haven’t noticed anyone from Hogwarts or Beauxbatons yet.”

“I wonder if any of them put their names in last night after we’d all gone to bed,” Harry posited. “That’s what I would have done. I wouldn’t want everyone watching. I mean, what if the goblet just spat your name back out again?”

Regulus and Hermione chuckled, looking up just as Fred, George, and Lee came sprinting down the stairs to the Entrance Hall, wide smiles plastered on each of their faces, their eyes manic with some new plan they were enacting.

“We’ve just taken it,” Fred whispered triumphantly to them.

“What did you take?” Hermione asked curiously.

“The Aging Potion, of course,” Fred said.

“One drop each,” George added, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

“I don’t think this is going to work, you know,” Hermione said sternly. “I doubt Dumbledore would have missed this when creating the Age Line.”

Fred, George, and Lee all ignored her, but Regulus thought she had a point. Not that he was planning to intervene, knowing whatever happened to the three troublemakers would no doubt be hilarious.

“I wonder if you could enter,” Hermione whispered to him, speaking so quietly that no one else could hear. Regulus had thought of this himself, not that he would willingly put his name in, but he did wonder if the Age Line would affect him. He shrugged at her, but he could see the curious glint in her eye. He wondered if she would force him to cross the line just so she could test it.

They watched as Fred, then George, crossed the line before being promptly ejected from the circle. They landed nearly ten feet away, crashing painfully to the cold floor, and sprouted identical long white beards. The entire Entrance Hall filled with laughter, even Fred and George joining in.

“I did warn you,” Dumbledore said. He sent them up to the Hospital Wing a moment later, informing them of several other students who had already tried futilely to age themselves up so they could enter the tournament. Regulus thought he noticed Dumbledore’s eyes flicker over to him as he spoke, but he couldn’t be sure that he didn’t imagine it.

They spent most of breakfast talking about who from Hogwarts might be chosen. Ron stayed suspiciously silent throughout the conversation. Regulus desperately wanted to pull him aside and ask him what he saw, hopefully in a way that Hermione would not overhear, but he didn’t know if Ron would actually tell him.

They headed to Hagrid’s after they finished eating. Hermione spent much of the visit talking about her house elf group S.P.E.W. that she was trying to get Hagrid to join.

“It’d be doin’ ‘em an unkindness, Hermione,” Hagrid said gravely when she finished speaking. Hagrid wasn’t the first to make this argument, claiming that it would hurt the house elves if she tried to free them. He wasn’t wrong that they would be greatly insulted if they were freed by their owners, but Regulus had been starting to wonder. He still wasn’t sure how he felt, and he didn’t want to bring it up to Kreacher on the off chance that it would damage their relationship, but he had been thinking about it.

“But Harry set Dobby free, and he was over the moon about it!” she said. “And we heard he’s asking for wages now!”

“Did he get them?” Regulus interrupted to ask.

“Wages?” Hermione asked. Regulus nodded. “I don’t know yet, but I can’t see why Dumbledore would deny him.”

Regulus sat back in his chair considering this. He wondered how many house elves didn’t want freedom because wages were so hard to come by. He had always heard that it was dishonorable for house elves to be paid, that they considered it an insult, but he wondered how much of that was true. So many of the things he was taught growing up turned out to be at least partially false. He wondered if Dobby would talk to him if he asked.

That night was the Halloween Feast and when they entered the Great Hall, they noticed that the Goblet of Fire had been moved so that it was right in front of Dumbledore’s empty chair at the professors’ table. The feast seemed to drag on as they waited for the announcement of the champions. Everyone seemed to be fidgeting restlessly and Regulus was starting to feel unsettled. His chest kept clenching painfully like something bad was about to happen.

“Well,” Dumbledore finally said, drawing the instant attention of the student body, “the goblet is almost ready to make its decision. I estimate that it requires one more minute.” Regulus wasn’t sure how he could tell, but he was ready to get a move on. Dumbledore gave some instructions for the champions once they were chosen, which Regulus only half listened to, before he took out his wand and dimmed the lights in the Great Hall so that the Goblet of Fire was the brightest thing in the room.

Everyone watched with rapt attention as the fire in the goblet suddenly turned a crimson red before sparks began to fly out of it. A lick of fire shot out intensely and out flew a charred

piece of parchment.

“The champion for Durmstrang will be Viktor Krum,” Dumbledore said loudly. The applause was deafening, so loud it almost hurt Regulus’s ears.

“No surprises there!” Ron yelled, cheering along with the rest of the crowd. Karkaroff looked extremely pleased, which unnerved Regulus. He didn’t like the way the man’s face stretched with his crooked grin.

It was another few seconds before the fire turned red again and spat out another piece of parchment.

“The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour.” The girl that Harry and Ron were sure was part Veela stood gracefully to her feet, sweeping down the aisles in a flourish of silvery blonde hair.

“Oh, look, they’re all disappointed,” Hermione noted of the other Beauxbatons students, several of whom had begun openly sobbing. The goblet turned red one more time just a moment after Fleur left the room.

“The Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory!” Every single Hufflepuff jumped to their feet and began screaming wildly. Ron shook his head just slightly, an annoyed and unsatisfied look on his face. Regulus thought for a moment that an expression of relief crossed his features before it disappeared. He didn’t understand it though. What had Ron been expecting?

“Excellent!” Dumbledore said cheerfully after the noise finally died down, though it took far longer than it did for either of the other two champions. “Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count on you all to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will —”

Dumbledore stumbled over the last word before falling silent, the fire in the goblet distracting him instantly. It was turning red again, sparking flying out of it in every direction.

“What’s happening?” Hermione whispered just as a huge flame shot out and another piece of parchment began fluttering toward the ground. Dumbledore reached out a hand seemingly on instinct and grabbed the paper. There was a long, tense moment of silence as Dumbledore openly stared at the slip.

Dumbledore cleared his throat before speaking, his eyes glued to the parchment.

“Harry Potter.”

Regulus thought his head might explode. The tension that had been building up all day suddenly dispersed, quickly becoming replaced with a numbness that Regulus should have been worried about. Every head in the room turned to look at Harry who seemed just as disconnected as Regulus was, his eyes wide and empty.

Whispers began to spread throughout the room, growing louder by the second. Harry turned to look at Regulus.

"I didn't put my name in," he said, his words dismayed. "You know I didn't."

Regulus mentally shook himself. "I know," Regulus said quietly. Harry looked imploringly at Ron and Hermione, but both of them just stared back, their faces blank with shock.

"Harry Potter!" Dumbledore called again. He looked like he had straightened up, having gotten over the initial shock. "Harry! Up here, if you please!"

"Go on," Hermione whispered, giving Harry a little push. Harry walked up toward the professors' table, stumbling slightly on the hem of his robes. He looked like he was in a daze, and Regulus noticed his hands shaking just slightly.

"Well... through the door, Harry," Dumbledore said grimly. Harry moved toward the side door and suddenly Regulus was on his feet. What was he doing? He couldn't just let Harry walk in there, he needed to help him.

Just as soon as he was standing, he was yanked back so he was sitting next to Hermione again. He looked over at her in confusion and noticed her fists were clenched tightly in his cloak.

"You can't just barge in there after him," she whispered fiercely.

"Why not?" Regulus said, perhaps a bit nonsensically given that he knew precisely why he couldn't do that.

"Well, that is quite enough excitement for tonight," Dumbledore said before sending them off to bed. Regulus didn't move from his spot, but he could see teachers and prefects coming down the aisles to shoo curious students out of the Great Hall.

"Come on, we'll wait for him outside," Hermione said, clearly trying to get them to move. The moment they were outside the doors, Ron turned like he was going to leave, but Hermione grabbed him by the back of his robes. "What are we going to do?"

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, sounding petulant and annoyed. Regulus didn't have the wherewithal to figure out why.

"I think you guys should go back, I'll wait," Regulus said quickly. They were attracting too much attention standing in a group.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked instantly.

"Yes, we don't know what or who is safe anymore," Regulus said, his words felt jumbled, but he hoped they understood. "If someone did this, then Harry is in danger."

"In danger?" Ron scoffed. Regulus looked at him curiously.

“Whoever put Harry’s name in isn’t his friend,” Regulus explained. “And given how many enemies he has, we all need to be careful. You two should stay together till you get back to the common room.”

Ron still seemed annoyed but nodded nonetheless. Hermione gave him one more long look before turning to leave, both of them glancing over their shoulders as they went. Regulus leaned against the wall. Surely Harry wouldn’t be hurt in that room, whoever did this intended for him to compete, it wouldn’t make sense for him to get hurt now. Still, he was having trouble shaking the desire to go running into the room so that he could drag Harry away to safety. They would have to tell Sirius and Remus before they read it in the papers. Regulus was not looking forward to having that conversation.

It took nearly an hour for Harry to leave the Great Hall, and he looked just as dazed then as he had earlier.

“Harry,” Regulus said quietly when he spotted him. Harry jumped slightly at the sound of his voice, turning to look at him. “What’s going on?” Regulus walked up to him, grabbed him by the arm, and pulled him into one of the small unused offices that was right off the Reception Hall. Harry followed him without arguing.

Regulus locked the door behind him. He could hear the sounds of other people leaving the Great Hall, and he didn’t want to be interrupted. Harry’s skin was unusually pale and sallow.

“Tell me what happened,” Regulus demanded.

“Moody said that I’m going to die,” Harry said.

“What?” Regulus shouted. Harry jumped slightly at the noise, and Regulus grabbed him by the shoulders firmly, doing his best to ground him.

“He thinks someone put my name in the goblet knowing I would have to compete, and he thinks it might be because they’re trying to kill me,” Harry said after a moment, the words spilling out of my mouth so quickly that Regulus almost couldn’t follow them.

“He said that?” Regulus asked, but something must have shown on his face because Harry immediately started shaking.

“You believe him, don’t you? You think I’m going to die in this stupid tournament,” Harry said, his voice edging into hysterics.

“No, Harry. No. You’re not going to die,” Regulus said. Harry was shivering so intensely that Regulus didn’t know how he was still standing. He imagined all the adrenaline and panic from the last hour was finally flooding his body now that he wasn’t in a room full of people who would judge him for it.

Harry was saying something else, but his words were shaking so badly that Regulus couldn’t make it out. Regulus pulled him in for a hug which Harry returned immediately.

"They're forcing you to compete?" Regulus asked. He didn't want to distress Harry more than he already was, but he needed to understand what was happening. Harry nodded against his shoulder. "Even though you're underage?"

"I have to," Harry mumbled, his voice catching slightly. His arms tightened to the point where they were almost painful.

"Okay," Regulus said quietly. "Okay. You're not going to die. I'm going to help you and we'll get through this." Harry nodded again but didn't speak. It took him a long while to calm down enough for him to talk again, but Regulus just held him close the whole time. He couldn't even imagine how he was feeling. Harry was targeted every single year, he could never get a break, but this time it was worse. Now he would be fighting for his life before a huge crowd of people, likely including the person who had specifically done this to him.

"Did they have any idea who did this?" Regulus asked once Harry stopped shaking. Harry pulled away and quickly wiped his face, Regulus looked away to give him a semblance of privacy.

"I don't know," Harry said. "Moody said they used a spell to make the goblet forget that there were only three schools."

"Hm," Regulus said, "I'll have to check in with Dumbledore. Did they tell you anything else?"

"The first task is on the twenty-fourth of November," Harry replied.

"What's it going to be?"

"They didn't say. Bagman said it was to test our daring, courage in the face of the unknown," Harry said with clear disdain. His panic had turned to frustration and annoyance. Regulus could tell that the fear was still there, but he wasn't drowning in it and that was all they could hope for at the moment.

"I'll figure it out," Regulus said. "You're not alone, all right?" Harry nodded and, finally, looked calm.

"Does anyone else know I didn't do it?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Regulus replied honestly. "But don't worry about it right now. They're going to believe what they want to. Let's just worry about getting through it."

"I'm tired," Harry said suddenly. He sounded it, his voice dull, his shoulder sagging with exhaustion.

"I should probably go talk to Dumbledore," Regulus said. "Let me walk you back to the dorm first."

"Can you just talk to him tomorrow?" Harry said with a groan. Regulus heard the real plea behind it, Harry didn't want to be alone, and he would no doubt have to face some kind of madness in the Gryffindor common room.

“Of course,” Regulus agreed, throwing an arm around Harry’s shoulders as they left the room and walked up the marble stairs.

Nearly everyone was still awake when they made it to the common room, but luckily they were able to escape up to the dorm room relatively quickly. Hermione wasn’t anywhere to be seen, but Regulus guessed she would have gone to bed already. She would no doubt have a ton of questions for them the next morning.

“Oh, hello,” Ron said when they made it into the dorm room. The other boys were still downstairs so the three of them were alone. Ron was grinning at Harry in a way that looked unnerving and strained.

“Hey,” Harry muttered, pulling at the Gryffindor banner that Lee had tied around him. Regulus cast a quick spell to loosen the knot so that Harry could pull it off and drop it to the ground.

“So, congratulations,” Ron said. Regulus’s hackles went up right away.

“What do you mean, congratulations?” Harry replied.

“How’d you do it? Did you use the Invisibility Cloak?” Ron asked, he wasn’t smiling anymore, instead, he was grimacing.

“I didn’t,” Harry replied. “Besides, I don’t think the Invisibility Cloak would have fooled the Age Line.”

“Suppose not, since if it did, it would have covered both of us, wouldn’t it? But you found another way, did you?” Ron said, his voice growing snippy.

“No, I didn’t,” Harry said firmly.

“Did you do it for him then?” Ron said, addressing Regulus for the first time since they entered the room.

“What?” Regulus said dumbly.

“You can get past the Age Line, can’t you?” Ron said accusingly. Regulus paused for a second, trying to make sure that he had heard him correctly before responding. Harry had frozen as well.

“What makes you say that?” Regulus asked carefully. Ron rolled his eyes.

“I know who you actually are,” Ron said sharply.

“How?” Harry asked. Regulus shot him a look, but Harry was completely focused on Ron, not even sparing Regulus a glance.

“I thought you guys trusted me, but obviously you don’t,” Ron said, looking between them a few times before pulling the hangings around his four-poster bed shut.

Harry looked at Regulus incredulously, but Regulus didn't know what to say. Had Luna or Hermione told Ron? He hadn't actually thought about the fact that he should include him in a while and now he was feeling a bit bad about that. He figured he would get around to telling him the truth about who he was, but he hadn't had the chance yet.

"Whatever," Harry snapped, pulling off his cloak roughly and dropping it on the ground. "I'm going to bed."

"Wait," Regulus said, before giving Harry an apologetic look. "We have to call Sirius first."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because if he wakes up tomorrow and reads about this in the *Prophet* then he's going to overreact. It's better if we tell him now," Regulus explained.

"You think this is going to be in the *Prophet*?" Harry asked, his mouth hanging open in surprise.

"Yes," Regulus said slowly. He didn't think that was the surprising thing here, but Harry looked like he hadn't even considered that as a possibility.

"This is awful," Harry said, groaning quietly as he rubbed his eyes. "All right, let's call Sirius. Do you think he'll even be up?"

"Hopefully one of them will be," Regulus said. Harry pulled out the mirror, and they both piled onto Harry's bed.

"Sirius," Harry said but nothing happened. "Sirius!" Harry shouted. Regulus pulled the hangings closed and cast a silencing charm. "Maybe he's not awake."

"Sirius, for Merlin's sake!" Regulus said loudly. Suddenly there was a yelp from the mirror and Sirius's disheveled face appeared. Regulus would never mention it, and he hoped that Harry wouldn't notice, but he was pretty sure that Sirius had been crying. His eyes were rimmed red, his nose was stuffy, and there was still a slight tremble to his lips when he first answered them.

"What's going on?" Sirius asked anxiously.

"We need to talk to you about the tournament," Regulus said. "Is Lupin there?" It was the wrong thing to say. Sirius looked away, folding his lips between his teeth in a way that meant he was holding back tears before he seemed to bury his feelings and get a grip.

"He's out," Sirius said. "I'll relay the message. What's happening with the — did you say tournament?"

"The Triwizard Tournament," Harry said. He was looking at Regulus out of the corner of his eye like he wasn't sure how to proceed.

"Oh, right," Sirius mumbled. "What about it?"

“Try not to freak out,” Harry said. Again, it was the wrong thing to say because Sirius was immediately on high alert.

“What’s happening?”

“Harry’s name was drawn,” Regulus said, aiming to get it over with quickly. “We don’t know who entered him in the tournament, but they are forcing him to compete.”

“What?” Sirius said, but Regulus could see the beginnings of a smile on his lips. Of course, he would be excited about this.

“Sirius,” Regulus snapped. “This is not a good thing. Someone entered him into this tournament because they wanted to hurt him.”

“Yes, okay, I know that,” Sirius said, his mouth pulling down into a deep frown. “You think Karkaroff did this?”

“You told him about Karkaroff?” Regulus asked. Harry nodded. “Yes, I think Karkaroff could have done it, but I can’t be sure. There is something off about Moody too, but I don’t know what.”

Sirius sighed. “I feel like I’m too far from you both.” He was looking away now, staring off at something they couldn’t see. “I’m no help at all.”

“We’re not calling you to get your help,” Regulus said. “We’re calling so you hear it from us and not from the morning paper.”

“I *can* help,” Sirius snapped.

“That is not what I meant and you know it,” Regulus argued. Harry accidentally interrupted the beginnings of their squabble by yawning, though he was trying to cover it up. “We can talk about this more tomorrow, I just wanted to make sure you knew.”

“Right,” Sirius agreed, but he was watching Harry, his eyes soft. “You get some sleep.”

“Night, Sirius,” Harry muttered. Regulus tucked the mirror back into his trunk and climbed into bed. He drifted off to sleep with his head filled with fantasies of kidnapping Harry and running as far away as he could.

the hideout.

Chapter Notes

im posting this early because i love this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Only your son would end up the fourth champion in a Triwizard Tournament,” Sirius mumbled with a chuckle. He didn’t see James much anymore, the hallucinations finally starting to settle after his time in Azkaban, but he still found himself talking to them even though they weren’t there. “Knowing Harry, he’ll probably end up winning the whole thing.”

After the night when Harry’s name was drawn, Sirius had left Grimmauld Place and taken up residence in a cave near Hogsmeade. It was not very pleasant with only a damn dirt floor to sleep on, but Sirius found it comforting nonetheless. It almost felt like he was back in Azkaban, just without the dementors hanging over him at all times. He just couldn’t bear to stay in Grimmauld any longer.

He had thought, rather naively, that he and Remus would be able to work things out. He hoped that they would at least be friends again, but Remus had been so distant that it was almost worse than being alone. Sirius felt like he was living with a ghost, like he was being haunted by a person who was still alive. He hated it.

After Regulus and Harry had both returned to Hogwarts, Sirius and Remus were left to awkwardly avoid each other. Not that Sirius wanted to avoid Remus, he had never been one to avoid a confrontation, but Remus had always been a master at it, and the years apart had only made him more proficient. Sirius knew that he was driving Remus mad during the days that Regulus was unconscious, but he couldn’t help it. However, it seemed to just drive Remus further away and things didn’t improve even after Regulus recovered.

They had only had one successful conversation, about a week after Regulus left for school. Sirius had been experiencing a rather odd hallucination where Lily and his father were having an in-depth discussion about whether Sirius deserved a trial. Sirius had been only half listening, trying desperately to remember a time when those two people would have interacted. Of course, there wasn’t one. Orion Black would never deign to talk to a Muggleborn.

“Sirius?” Remus said. Sirius looked over, he hadn’t noticed him walk into the kitchen. “What are you staring at?”

“Oh,” Sirius muttered, looking back over to Lily and Orion who were now watching him closely, both looking equally annoyed that they had been interrupted. “Sorry,” he said to them, hoping they would just continue talking and leave him out of it.

“What are you apologizing for?” Remus asked uncertainly. Sirius glanced back at him. He looked supremely uncomfortable, leaning against the doorframe with false ease. He quickly crossed his arms over his chest when he noticed Sirius watching him.

“Not you,” Sirius said. “They’re —” He wasn’t sure that he knew how to explain exactly so he just motioned to where Lily and Orion were watching him. Remus looked in that direction quickly before looking back at Sirius, confusion and worry in his eyes.

“Is there someone else in the room with us?” Remus asked carefully. He was always doing that now, tiptoeing around questions or asking them in that soft, professor voice that made Sirius feel like a scolded child. He might be into it, in a different circumstance that is.

“Right, I know they’re not real,” Sirius said quickly. Remus raised his eyebrow at him but otherwise didn’t react. “Or,” Sirius amended, “I usually know. I usually can tell. Sometimes it just takes me a bit.”

Remus took a beat to respond, his eyes shooting around the room like he was searching for a solution. It was a plea for someone to rescue him, or at least that was how Sirius interpreted it. He wasn’t sure that he was very good at reading Remus anymore. He didn’t think he really knew this version of him.

“Does this happen a lot?” Remus asked. Sirius sighed and put his hands on his hips tiredly. He didn’t want to have this conversation, not now and not ever. He shrugged helplessly.

“Periodically,” he answered when Remus didn’t speak.

“How do you usually figure out that it’s a hallucination?” Remus asked.

“Sometimes it’s obvious right away, otherwise I just have to wait it out,” Sirius explained before he realized that he didn’t actually want to reveal that little tidbit of information.

Remus sighed tightly. “You could ask me,” he said.

“What?” Sirius asked, turning to look at him again. Remus had moved, walking so silently that Sirius didn’t even notice, and was now standing directly behind him.

“Whenever you see something, if you want to ask me if it’s real, I’ll tell you,” Remus said. He spoke with a gentleness that soothed something in Sirius. He wished Remus would touch him, even just a small caress, but he never did anymore. Sirius didn’t blame him, but he couldn’t deny that his body ached with his desire for it.

“Okay,” Sirius agreed, giving Remus a small, grateful smile. Remus returned it quickly, before shuffling off to make tea. It was helpful having Remus available to explain away hallucinations. But those small interactions weren’t enough to bridge the insurmountable gap between them.

By the time Halloween rolled around Sirius was itching for a fight. He wasn’t even sure what he was mad about exactly, or maybe he knew but just wasn’t ready to unpack it. The only

thing he knew was that he was frustrated with Remus, and he was going to get him to talk whether he wanted to or not.

It wasn't pretty, and Sirius would rather do anything else than relive it, but he successfully riled Remus up. He had always been good at that. It wasn't his finest moment, and he definitely said some things that in hindsight he shouldn't have, but he just couldn't keep circling the drain of his and Remus's failed relationship.

It was him screaming, "Sometimes I think you would have been happier if I just stayed in Azkaban," that really derailed the already horrible fight.

"Maybe you're right!" Remus had shouted back, grabbing his jacket and sweeping out of the house as fast as he could. He knew logically that Remus didn't really mean what he said, that the words were spoken in anger and frustration, but Sirius still let himself wallow in the pain the words caused. Sirius didn't even realize he was crying until he started hearing his name being called from the mirror a full two hours later.

Harry looked horrible, and Regulus's face was pulled into one of intense stress. It made Sirius want to charge back into the castle, just so he could check in on them. The conversation didn't help at all. Harry was in danger again and Sirius was stuck hiding in his childhood home, useless to everyone around him. Worse than useless when it came to Remus.

He barely even had to decide to leave. It felt like muscle memory at that point. He packed a few things, nothing that could be traced back to him if he lost it, besides the mirror, before going to head out the door. It was only at the last minute that he remembered Remus. He would no doubt be back, though Sirius had no idea when. He was off in London doing Merlin knows what and Sirius had no safe way to contact him.

He pulled out a piece of parchment and left a note on the kitchen table updating Remus on the tournament and where Sirius had gone. He didn't want to wait around for Remus, the last words from the fight were still branded on his skin, and he winced every time he remembered them.

He didn't have a wand. He had been using Remus's since he had moved into Grimmauld Place, so he wasn't able to apparate. Buckbeak was still living in Walburga's old room, somehow very comfortable in the small, tight space, but Sirius hoped that he was ready to fly. He was in luck, as Buckbeak followed him out of the house, and took off the moment Sirius was on his back.

It took a long while to fly to Scotland. Buckbeak was clearly exhilarated to be out in the open again because he kept dipping and climbing through the air rapidly. It was fun at first, a nice distraction from the feelings that Sirius had been drowning in, but after a while, it started to become annoying. By the time Sirius landed in Hogwarts Valley, it was nearly nighttime again, the sun just starting to set on the horizon.

It was chilly, but Sirius didn't mind. It felt refreshing to be outside again. He changed into Padfoot once they reached the ground and started the journey North toward the school. Buckbeak kept getting distracted, so it took nearly all night to reach the cave Sirius was now

residing in, and by the time he got there, he was too exhausted to do anything else besides collapse on the hard ground and go to sleep.

He fell right back into a routine of hunting rats and wandering the forest near his cave, before coming back to sit around and periodically nap with Buckbeak. The hippogriff seemed unbothered by their change in location, quickly making a nest for himself in the center of the cave and settling down for bed.

The night after Sirius arrived, he was distracted from dozing by the sound of Harry's voice calling him through the mirror. He was a little worried about what Regulus would have to say about him leaving Grimmauld, but it was only Harry this time.

"Where are you?" Harry asked once he could see Sirius's face.

"I didn't like being so far from you, Harry. Things are getting dangerous," Sirius said by way of explanation. Harry didn't pry, but Sirius knew it was only a matter of time before he heard from Regulus.

Harry spent most of their call complaining about his friend Ron, who apparently believed that Harry had lied to him about not putting his name in the Goblet of Fire, and was now ignoring both Harry and Regulus.

"Why Regulus?" Sirius asked.

"Oh," Harry said, looking uncomfortable for a moment. "I guess Ron figured out who Regulus really is, and he's upset because we didn't tell him ourselves."

"Why didn't Regulus tell Ron?" Sirius asked. He knew that Hermione, their muggleborn friend, and Luna Lovegood already knew, but he thought Regulus was friends with Ron just as much as he was with the others.

"I don't know. I think he was getting around to it, but he just hadn't yet," Harry answered, but it was clear that he wanted to move on, so Sirius let him. He listened to Harry's complaints and worries for nearly an hour before Harry was yawning too much to stay awake.

It had been a long time since Sirius had thought about the drama that came with being fourteen years old. It was almost refreshing to hear Harry complain about a fight with one of his friends rather than his worries about Voldemort or the Death Eaters running amok in the school. He wondered how Regulus was dealing with the stress. He doubted he was doing well, Regulus never coped well with stress.

He went down to Hogsmeade a few days later and stole a copy of the Prophet. That was how he discovered the ridiculous article Rita Skeeter wrote about Harry. His face was plastered all over the paper, the entire front page was made up of just one picture of him, the article continuing on pages two, six, and seven. The article itself was absurd including quotes from Harry that Sirius was almost positive were fake.

"I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me if they could see me now," the article read. Sirius chuckled even as a fiery pit of anger opened up in his

stomach. It didn't even sound like Harry.

“I know nothing will hurt me during the tournament because they’re watching over me.” Ludicrous, Sirius thought. Harry would never say that. He had seen firsthand how Harry looked after finding out he would be participating in the tournament, and it wasn’t the face of a boy who “knew nothing could hurt him.” No, Harry was worried, and for good reason.

The strangest part of the article was Rita’s reference to Hermione as Harry’s girlfriend. *“Harry has at last found love at Hogwarts. Harry is rarely seen out of the company of one Hermione Granger.”* Sirius wasn’t inclined to believe anything Rita said, but he did wonder if something was going on between Harry and Hermione. He got the chance to ask a few nights later when Regulus called.

“Harry said you were hiding out in a cave,” Regulus said instead of a greeting.

“I was so far —”

“Does Lupin know where you are?” Regulus interrupted to ask. Sirius looked away for a second.

“I left him a letter,” Sirius explained. Regulus sighed. There was clearly something he wanted to say, but he was working hard to hold it back.

“This is extremely reckless, Sirius,” Regulus settled on.

“I’m aware of that, but I’m being careful,” Sirius replied. He felt like he was being lectured by a professor. “I want to be close by in case something happens.” Regulus sighed again.

“Fine,” Regulus said. They fell into a beat of silence.

“Is that all you called for?” Sirius asked.

“I guess,” Regulus said. “Harry wants to see you, but I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” Sirius perked up immediately.

“Yes, we could meet in Hogsmeade,” Sirius said.

“No, Sirius,” Regulus replied. “Harry is being watched. You would definitely get caught.”

“Ugh,” Sirius groaned. “What’s life without a little danger?” He had meant it as a joke, but it sobered both of them immediately. “Right, well, I’ll be close by anyways.”

“I’ll come by,” Regulus said. “I don’t think Harry should. Where exactly is this cave?” Sirius did his best to explain it to him. “Did you bring anything with you? Food? A wand?”

“I don’t have a wand,” Sirius said.

“Right,” Regulus said with a small shake of his head.

“I have a question,” Sirius said.

“Yes?” Regulus prompted, sounding distracted.

“Are Hermione and Harry together?” Sirius asked. Regulus chuckled, even as a look of anger flashed across his face.

“Been reading Rita’s work?”

“Not much else to do here,” Sirius replied. Regulus shook his head, his mouth twisting into a mixture of a grimace and a smirk.

“She’s a pest,” Regulus said. “No, they’re not dating. They seem more like siblings than anything.”

“Ah, so is there anyone he’s interested in?” Sirius asked. He felt a little silly asking about Harry’s dating life, but it was oddly relaxing to talk about something so normal.

Regulus rolled his eyes, but for once it didn’t seem like his annoyance was aimed at Sirius. “No,” Regulus said. “No one attainable that is.” Sirius raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“What does that mean?” Regulus looked around suspiciously before pulling the hangings around his bed closed. This ought to be good, Sirius thought triumphantly.

“You can’t mention this to him,” Regulus said.

“I won’t,” Sirius said.

“I’m serious,” Regulus said, hurrying to continue speaking so Sirius wouldn’t intervene. “I’m not joking. If you tell him, I’ll hex your bollocks off.”

Sirius laughed loudly. “Okay, I promise.”

“Harry may or may not have a crush on the other Hogwarts champion,” Regulus said quietly. Sirius racked his brain trying to remember if his name was mentioned in Rita’s article, but he could only recall the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students’ names.

“Who?” Sirius said.

“Cedric Diggory,” Regulus said with another roll of his eyes. Sirius suddenly remembered one of the conversations he’d had with Harry over the summer, when Harry mentioned losing only one Quidditch game against the Hufflepuffs, and a certain seeker apologizing to him. At the time, Sirius had thought Harry’s red face had been because of embarrassment over the loss, but now it all made sense.

“And you don’t approve?” Sirius said. It was obvious that Regulus wasn’t thrilled about the crush.

“He’s too old for Harry,” Regulus said, then paused for a second, before whispering. “And he’s a *Hufflepuff*.” Sirius burst out laughing, incapable of holding it back when Regulus said Hufflepuff like it was a curse word.

“Do you think Cedric’s interested in him?” Sirius asked, once he was able to get his breathing under control.

“Who knows,” Regulus said with a shrug. “He wouldn’t be the only one,” he mumbled.

“Oh?” Sirius said. He felt like they were two old women, gossiping uselessly.

Regulus shook his head, a small smile on his face. “Let’s just say he has a way of attracting seekers.” Sirius tried to remember who else was a seeker at the school, but… surely not.

“Not Narcissa’s brat?” Sirius gasped. Now it was Regulus’s turn to laugh.

“I don’t think he realizes it yet. It’s a bit painful to watch honestly,” Regulus said. “He’s constantly seeking me out to make sure I’m *keeping Harry safe*.” Regulus did a rather impressive impression of a stuck-up little kid. Sirius’s stomach hurt from laughing so much. “He started making these ridiculous badges for everyone in the school.”

“Badges?” Sirius said, gasping for air as he chuckled. Regulus explained the Potter Stinks badges, and Sirius couldn’t help from losing it all over again. Poor kid, he had no idea what was happening.

“He’ll figure it out eventually,” Regulus said, before looking incredibly sad. “Or he won’t.”

Sirius watched his brother closely, but he was sure he was missing some key piece of information. He didn’t think he liked the look on his face though, like he was mourning something. “What about you?”

“What?” Regulus asked, looking caught for a second.

“Anyone you are interested in?” Sirius asked sarcastically.

“No,” Regulus said with a sardonic grin. “I’m not interested in any of the children I talk to on a daily bases.” Sirius almost believed him, except for the slight blush on his cheeks.

“What are you hiding?” Sirius asked. Regulus looked like he was seconds away from throwing the mirror across the room, and Sirius could see him clamming up by the second. “You don’t have to tell me if you have a crush.”

“I don’t have a crush,” Regulus said sternly, before coughing. He kept looking at something behind the mirror, like someone else was there listening in. “Someone else —”

It clicked for Sirius right away. “Someone asked you on a date, didn’t they?”

Regulus’s jaw clenched, a flash of embarrassment behind his eyes. “They asked me to the Yule Ball.”

“Aww,” Sirius said before laughing loudly.

“Yes, it’s very flattering,” Regulus said dryly.

“Are you going to go?” Sirius asked.

“No, Sirius, of course I’m not going to go,” Regulus replied exasperatedly.

“Why not? Do they go to Hogwarts?” Sirius asked.

“They go to Beauxbatons,” Regulus said.

“Then what’s the harm? They’ll be leaving in less than a year, right?”

“You sound like Hermione,” Regulus admonished.

“Do I? Maybe she’s onto something then,” Sirius said.

Regulus shook his head again. “Good night, Sirius,” Regulus said before his face disappeared. Sirius fell asleep that night still chuckling to himself, imagining the poor French wizard that had a crush on little Reggie.

On Hogsmeade weekend, Sirius went down to the river and cleaned his hair and clothes as best he could. If Regulus was coming by, then he didn’t want to worry him too much. He only had three pairs of clothes with him, but it was enough to cycle through. He stayed as Padfoot as he waited in the cave, unintentionally dozing all day.

“Sirius,” he heard someone call. He opened his eyes, blinking blearily, before transforming back.

It wasn’t Regulus.

“Remus,” Sirius said, surprised. He was dressed warmly, a coat tucked around him tightly. He looked tired. “What are you doing here?”

“Your brother told me where you were,” Remus said.

“Traitor,” Sirius muttered, though he hadn’t actually asked Regulus not to tell.

Remus sighed unhappily. “Listen, I’m sor —”

“It’s fine,” Sirius said quickly. “I’m not upset.”

“Sirius, you left Grimmauld Place so that you could hide out in a cave with only a hippogriff for company.”

Sirius half shrugged. “Okay, I’m not upset anymore,” Sirius said. Remus gave him a long look before setting down a box in front of him. “What’s this?”

Remus slowly sat down on the ground across from him. It was clear that the frozen dirt wasn’t nearly as comfortable for Remus as it was for Sirius. Sirius winced sympathetically.

“Here,” Remus said. He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a wand. It wasn’t one that Sirius had ever seen before. Sirius took it carefully. He could feel slight magic swirling in his

fingertips when they touched the wood. It wasn't a wand bonded to him, but it would work.

"Whose was this?" Sirius asked suspiciously.

"It's new," Remus said. "Regulus all but forced me to buy it." Sirius chuckled.

"Thanks," Sirius said. Remus nodded, a small smile on his lips.

"I brought food and some more clothes," he said, nudging the box with his boot.

"You didn't have to do that," Sirius replied.

"I know," Remus said. "But if you're going to stay here then I wanted you to have something."

"Where are you staying?" Sirius asked quietly. He wasn't actually sure he wanted to know the answer. Remus, to Sirius's surprise, laughed.

"Your lovely brother rented a room for me at the Three Broomsticks," Remus said. "Said it was better if I was nearby."

"Wow," Sirius said.

"I agree with him," Remus said, giving Sirius a meaningful look. "Harry needs us, and I don't want you out here all alone. I probably won't be able to come up here too often, someone will definitely see me eventually, but I'll bring food when I can."

"Thanks, Remus," Sirius said.

Remus smiled at him, and for a moment, Sirius could imagine that they were still in love.

Chapter End Notes

follow me on tumblr for exact update schedules: [maladaptivewriting](https://maladaptivewriting.tumblr.com/). You can also follow me on tiktok under the same username.

the invitation.

Chapter Notes

james took this chapter out of my hands and rattled it around until i let him do what he wanted

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“It’s dragons, Regulus,” Harry said, startling Regulus from where he had been dozing in front of the fire. He hadn’t been sleeping well, not that he ever did, but it was especially bad now, and he kept catching himself half falling asleep where he shouldn’t be. “I’m a goner.”

“What’s happening?” Regulus said confusedly, rubbing the drowsiness from his eyes.

“The thing Hagrid wanted to show me, it was dragons. One for each of the contestants.”

“Oh, Merlin,” Regulus groaned. He knew it wouldn’t be a cakewalk, but dragons? Even the other contestants were only seventeen, and they were expecting them to fight a dragon. “Do you know specifically what you’re supposed to do with the dragon?”

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. He was staring into the fire, his wide eyes open in residual panic.

“Okay,” Regulus said quietly. “Let’s not worry about this tonight. Tomorrow I will go to the library and research dragons. We will figure out what to do.”

“Cedric doesn't know,” Harry said as they stood up to go to the dorm. “I bet Krum and Fleur already know, I saw Karkaroff and Madame Maxime there, so they probably told their champions. Do you think I should tell Cedric?” Harry rambled.

Regulus sighed quietly. “I suppose it would only be fair.”

Regulus’s opinion of Cedric Diggory had not improved over the past few weeks, mostly because of the ridiculous way the other students had been treating Harry in favor of Cedric. However, he had at least come to terms with the fact that it wasn’t Cedric’s fault. To Regulus’s knowledge, he hadn’t actually done anything wrong. Yet.

Regulus had been a ball of stress since Halloween, and he had thought of little else other than the upcoming tasks, though that wasn’t for a lack of attempted distractions.

Draco had been a constant annoyance, not just for Harry, as he usually was, but for Regulus as well. Draco had been far more boisterous and irritating since Harry’s name came out of the goblet, and it had become a near-daily occurrence that he and Harry were fighting.

A few days after the champions were picked, Draco all but dragged him away from his friends to ask what was going on.

"How could you let Harry put his name in the goblet? Did you do it for him?" Draco hissed, unstable magic crackled around him violently.

"I didn't do anything and neither did Harry," Regulus replied tiredly even as his hair stood on end, reacting to the electrifying magic in the air.

"Well, you need to fix it," Draco said sharply. "You can't just let him go on like this. People die in these tournaments. I know, I looked it up."

"Don't you think that if I could get him out of this, I would have done so already?"

"I have no idea what you would do given how poor of a job you've done so far at keeping him safe." The words were like a slap in the face, and Regulus recoiled before he could stop himself.

"What are these stupid badges about?" Regulus whispered furiously. "You know he didn't ask for this."

"Like I'm going to give up an opportunity to —"

"You know, Draco, if you have a crush on him, you can just ask him out," Regulus snapped with perhaps a bit more venom than the situation called for. Draco's mouth opened in shock for a moment before he whipped his wand out.

"I don't have a crush on him," Draco said through clenched teeth, poking his wand into Regulus's chest. It was like having a fight with a younger version of himself.

"Really? That's not how it seems to me." Regulus could feel Draco's magic like a heavy smog, curling around his fingertips and braiding into his hair. It was almost surreal. He had never felt anything like it.

"What do you think you're doing?" Moody's voice came out of nowhere, the man rushing around the corner, wand already drawn. Regulus didn't even think about it, quickly stepping in front of Draco to block whatever spell Moody hoped to cast on the boy. He wasn't proud of the way he provoked him, and he wasn't about to let Moody transfigure him into some other animal as a punishment.

"You have to watch out for the Malfoys," Moody said a moment after Draco skittered down the corridor and out of sight. "There a nasty sort."

"I'm perfectly capable of dealing with Draco on my own," Regulus said in reply, not even bothering to address the way Moody spat the name Malfoy. He doubted he thought very highly of the Blacks either.

"I bet you are," Moody said with an odd tilt to his voice. Suddenly, Regulus felt like he might get violently sick in the middle of the hallway. He avoided Moody after that, more than he already was.

Regulus had thought that bringing up Draco's painfully obvious crush on Harry would cause him to learn at least a little bit of subtly, but if anything, he just became even more of a nuisance. Regulus was so far beyond done with it by the time the first task rolled around. Not to mention the attention that Regulus himself had been getting. That was just plain embarrassing.

Alexander was a student at Beauxbatons. He was beautiful, just like nearly all of their student body — at least the ones who had come to attend the games. His brown hair was sandy and curled perfectly, his blue eyes piercing and hard to look at. For anyone else, he would be a catch. For Regulus though... well, Regulus just wasn't sure.

Regulus hadn't thought about dating or crushes in a long time.

He fell in love with James completely by accident, and he never got over it. He lost James and then was forced to watch as he fell in love with someone else, someone better. Despite how excruciatingly painful that was, Regulus never moved on from that feeling of all-consuming love. He couldn't even bring himself to be mad at James for dating someone else, that's how much his stupid heart belonged to the man.

He didn't live very long after losing James, only a few years, and there wasn't any time in there to think seriously about anyone else. Barty certainly never counted. In his second life, he looked like a child, and he spent nearly all of his time surrounded by children. Not to mention that he had a task, he needed to destroy the Horcruxes and kill Voldemort. That kind of plan did not involve something as mundane as dating.

So when Alexander, with his perfect hair and pretty eyes, pulled Regulus aside so he could ask him to the Yule Ball, Regulus nearly choked on his tongue.

"I'm sorry?" Regulus said.

"I know we do not know each other very well," Alexander said. "But I wanted to ask you before anyone else did." Regulus stared at him, unsure of how to even respond. He had just learned the boy's name a second ago, he didn't know a single thing about him.

"I — I have to get to class," Regulus said before running away like the coward he was. He hadn't expected Alexander to ask again, and he did his best not to think about it during his next class

"What was that about, by the way?" Harry asked later that afternoon. "That guy from Beauxbatons, what did he want?" Regulus felt himself flush.

"Oh, nothing really," Regulus replied. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him.

"He didn't want anything?" she asked.

"He was — actually, he — he asked me to the Yule Ball," Regulus said, tripping over his words like a silly schoolgirl. Hermione giggled.

"Did he really?" she whispered happily. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," Regulus said.

"You didn't say anything?" she asked. "At all?"

"There wasn't much to say given how fast I ran away from him," Regulus confessed, feeling more embarrassed than he had in years. He looked over at Harry who was just watching him with a look of pure confusion. "What?"

"You have to say yes," Hermione interrupted.

"Why?" Regulus asked.

"Why would he say yes?" Harry asked, the deep line between his brows causing his lightning scar to crinkle.

"Why wouldn't he? Like half the girls in Gryffindor have a crush on him," Hermione said, a light dusting of pink on her cheeks, the only indicator that she might agree with those girls.

"He can't go to the Yule Ball with him. He's a boy," Harry said. Regulus and Hermione stared at him before Hermione chuckled.

"Oh, Harry," she said fondly.

It took several long conversations for Regulus to understand the way muggles felt about gay relationships and for Harry to understand that the Dursleys' viewpoints on gayness were just as despicable as their views on magic. Not that being gay was completely accepted in the wizarding world, there were still the pureblood beliefs about maintaining a bloodline that they had to contend with, but that was more of an inconvenience than a direct hatred.

Regulus had never been attracted to girls, though during his first life, he knew one day he would be forced to marry one and to produce at least two children with her. When he was very young, he used to hope that Sirius would have children early and free Regulus from his responsibility. That hope fell through when Sirius was disowned, not to mention that Regulus now knew that Sirius had very little intention of ever marrying or sleeping with any woman.

Harry, upon learning all of this, looked like his entire world had just been turned upside down and violently shaken. He was quiet for two full days after that, walking around the castle in a daze. Regulus almost regretted talking to him when he noticed his eyes lingering on Cedric for a beat too long every time the handsome Hufflepuff entered the room.

The strangest moment of all was the conversation Regulus had with James when he finally showed back up. Regulus was finally reading *Mackenzie's Mountain*, the book Lavender had given him that had been sitting at the bottom of his bag since he received it.

He was surprised by the content though. The few muggle books he had read were very different from the book Lavender gave him. *Mackenzie's Mountain*, it turned out, was a love story. A love story about a woman with the last name Potter falling in love with a man named Wolf. Regulus almost felt like it was some pointed dig from Lavender.

“What is the Yule Ball?” James asked. Regulus had been reading in the library late in the evening, it was almost completely abandoned and very silent, so the sound of James’s voice made him yelp in surprise.

“Where have you been? I haven’t seen you in weeks?” Regulus snapped.

“Thought you didn’t think I was real,” James said snidely.

“What?” Regulus said, shaking his head.

“I *said* I thought you did not think that I was real,” James repeated, lifting his nose in the air in an uncanny impression of Sirius when he was a child.

“You couldn’t find a less confusing way to say that?” Regulus said.

“You mean you couldn’t,” James said. He was sitting in the chair across from Regulus and lifted one of his crossed arms so that he could point directly in Regulus’s face.

Regulus looked down at James’s finger, before looking back up. “Huh?”

James rolled his eyes exasperatedly, he looked like a petulant child. “If I’m made up, then it’s your brain coming up with my dumb sentences.”

Regulus gave him a long look. “I guess,” Regulus said uncertainly, deeply unsure of the point James was trying to make.

“I’m not just in your brain, you know,” James said finally. Regulus thought that James was trying very hard to look stern. “And anyway, you didn’t answer my other question.”

“Which question was that?”

“What’s the Yule Ball?” he repeated.

“Oh,” Regulus said. “It’s a Christmas celebration for the Triwizard Tournament. Why haven’t I seen you in so long if you’re not just in my head?”

“Well, I didn’t think you had time for me. What with your new boyfriend and all,” James said sniffing pompously and looking away.

“My new boy — what?”

“You know what I’m talking about,” James said.

“I assure you I don’t,” Regulus replied. “I figured you were here to ask about Harry and the extremely dangerous tournament he’s been illegally entered into.”

James’s face paled. Regulus wasn’t sure that he had ever seen a ghost grow pale like that.

“Right,” James said before swallowing harshly. “Is there any way to get him out of it?”

Regulus shook his head. "I already talked to Dumbledore, and he said there was no way to pull him out once his name was drawn," Regulus explained. "They set an age line to keep anyone under seventeen from entering, so someone else must have put his name in."

"Shouldn't he be disqualified since he's not old enough to compete?"

"I asked the same thing, but apparently disqualification isn't really a part of this tournament. Dumbledore said that he has to show up to each task otherwise his magical core could be damaged."

"What? His magic could be affected by this?" James asked, sitting up in alarm.

"Dumbledore said that the Goblet of Fire is intrinsically tied to the champions' magic. It chooses each of them for a reason, though that reason is mostly unknown to us. Regardless, it is not random and when a name comes out of it, the goblet's magic and the champion's magic are intertwined."

"This is bad," James said after a long moment of silence.

"Yes, thank you, James, I'm aware of that," Regulus snapped viciously, the stress that was constantly weighing on his shoulders seemed suddenly far too overbearing.

"I'm sorry," James said softly, drawing Regulus's attention easily. Regulus's shoulders dropped instantly.

"I'm trying to keep him alive and out of danger," Regulus whispered. "But it's so hard."

"I know," James said, reaching out to grab Regulus's hand. Regulus gasped when he felt James's fingers against his own.

"How?" Regulus said.

"I don't understand it either," James said, though he looked thoughtful. "I'm sorry I haven't been around. Some of it was on accident, I get... caught sometimes. I don't know how to explain it, but I also could have shown up earlier."

"Why didn't you?" A very odd expression crossed James's face.

"I'm not proud to admit it," James mumbled. "I'm here now though."

Regulus gave him a long look before something clicked. "The Yule Ball," Regulus said before snickering unexpectedly. He tried to cover his mouth to keep the sound from coming out. James watched him carefully looking both unhappy and entertained.

"Yes, it's not my proudest moment."

"You are utterly ridiculous," Regulus said, still laughing quietly.

James half shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "Are you going to say yes?"

“He hasn’t asked again,” Regulus said but when James just kept watching him, he elaborated. “Probably not, though Hermione thinks I should.”

“Harry’s friend knows about this?”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Yes,” he said. James fell silent, watching Regulus with a quiet dissatisfaction.

“I think you should say yes,” James said finally, his voice firm.

“Weren’t you the one avoiding me because someone had the audacity to ask me to a dance?”

“Yes, but I was wrong,” James said decidedly. “You should go.”

Regulus shook his head at him disbelievingly. “I’ll think about it,” Regulus muttered. James smiled though it didn’t quite touch his eyes.

“I heard your conversation with Harry, by the way,” James said, leaning even farther forward. If he was real, Regulus was sure he would be able to feel his breath against his cheek. A feeling of longing nearly overwhelmed him at that moment.

“Which conversation?” Regulus asked, working hard to bury his feelings, shutting them behind thick stone walls in his head.

“The one about boys liking boys,” James said with a laugh at his own juvenile phrasing.

Regulus sighed tiredly. “Yeah, well I think I might grow to regret that conversation,” Regulus mumbled.

“You disapprove of Harry’s crush?” James asked. Regulus gave him a long look which just seemed to make James laugh. “You know,” he said, sobering suddenly, “of all the people who I thought might have a conversation like that with my son one day, I never would have guessed that it would be you.”

Regulus couldn’t hear any judgment in James’s voice, but he bristled nonetheless. “Well, someone had to explain it to him,” Regulus said defensively.

James, however, just looked impossibly soft. “I’m glad it was you,” James said.

“Hello, Regulus,” Luna said suddenly. Regulus sat up quickly. He hadn’t noticed how far forward he was leaning, as if he was trying to memorize every detail of James’s face.

“Luna,” Regulus said, his voice a touch more breathless than he would have liked.

“Madam Pince sent me back here to tell you that the library is closing,” she said softly.

“Oh, thanks,” Regulus responded, starting to throw his belongings back into his bag. He felt unsettled having Luna interrupt him from talking to James.

“Of course,” Luna said. “Good night, Regulus. Good night, James.” With that, she turned quickly and flounced away from them. Regulus was frozen for a moment before turning to look at James who appeared just as shocked as he felt.

They didn't talk again in the library, though James was next to him the entire journey up to the dorm room.

“How did she —”

“She’s Pandora’s daughter,” Regulus said quickly. “I don't know.” It wasn’t an answer, but it was still somehow unsurprising.

“What do you think it means?” James asked.

Regulus stared at him. James was standing in the common room now, dressed in a red sweater and faded blue jeans. His hair looked more put together than usual like he had combed it before showing up. Regulus wanted to hold him. He wanted to bury his fingers in James’s curls and breathe him in. He wanted so badly to touch him. And more than that, he wanted him to be real.

“Maybe you’re not... what I thought,” Regulus said quietly, taking a small step toward James. James tilted his head in confusion.

“What do you mean?” James asked, his eyes expectant and open.

“Maybe you’re really here,” Regulus whispered. He reached a hand out and James took it, like they were magnets, like he had no other choice but to catch him. His hand was warm and soft. Not quite real. But it was there. For that night, it was enough.

James was gone by the time Regulus woke the next morning, though he showed back up right before Regulus pulled out the mirror to call Sirius. He shouldn’t have been surprised that he had moved into a cave near them, but he was nonetheless. James listened quietly to the conversation, sitting behind the mirror so Regulus could see him the entire time. Mirth danced in his eyes as he listened to Regulus mention the boy who had asked him to the Yule Ball.

“You should get Remus to go meet him,” James said.

“Why? I can do it myself,” Regulus said, distractedly, already making a list of everything Sirius would need. A wand, for one. Food to keep him from eating rats.

“I had to trick them into spending time alone together for weeks before they finally figured themselves out,” James said, sounding like a tired parent. “Clearly they’re fighting again.”

“And that’s my problem because?” Regulus asked.

“Don’t you think they deserve some happiness, after all that time apart,” James said imploringly. Regulus sighed.

“Fine,” he muttered, pulling out a piece of parchment to write to Remus. He couldn’t force him to move into a random cave with an escaped prisoner, that would just be cruel, but he could certainly rent a room in Hogsmeade and heavily imply that Remus should be living there. James read over his shoulder, chuckling at Regulus’s less-than-subtle language.

“What is that?” James asked. Regulus lifted his head to look at where James was pointing. *Mackenzie’s Mountain* had fallen out of his bag when he was digging around in it for a quill.

“A book,” Regulus said quickly.

“It looks like a muggle romance,” James said.

“And how do you know that? Read a lot of muggle romances?” Regulus snarked.

“I had a — a friend who used to read them sometimes.” Regulus rolled his eyes.

“Just say Lily when you mean Lily,” Regulus said, exasperatedly. “Honestly, James.”

“Okay,” James said quietly. “Well, Lily used to read them. Not that one specifically, but it looks similar.”

“Lavender, one of the Gryffindor girls, gave it to me,” Regulus said.

“Another admirer?” James said with a wide smirk.

“Doubt it,” Regulus said with a laugh. “It is interesting though.”

“How so?” James asked.

“It’s about a Potter falling for a man named Wolf,” Regulus replied, a smirk of his own crossing his face. “Something you want to tell me?”

Regulus had been joking, but a bright blush spread across James’s cheeks. Regulus gasped. “It was just a crush,” James said, looking mortified.

“On Lupin?” Regulus asked, laughing quietly. James’s face turned even more red.

“I was very young,” James said, the words sounding like they were fighting their way out. “And you’ve seen Lupin.” Regulus decided to give him a break, not that he didn’t enjoy embarrassing James.

“Oh, yes,” Regulus said with a suggestive raise of his eyebrow. “I’ve seen him.”

James gasped, pointing at Regulus accusingly. “No!” he shouted. Regulus laughed even louder.

“I was very young,” Regulus said, lowering his voice in an impression of James. James guffawed, but he was interrupted from responding when there was a noise at the window. It looked like it was one of the school owls.

Regulus stood up and unlocked the window. The dusky owl flew in, doing a quick loop around the dorm room, before landing on Regulus's bedside table, sticking its leg out expectantly. Regulus unfurled the note that was tied there.

10 PM. My office.

"Who is that from?" James asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

"You would be happier not knowing," Regulus replied.

Chapter End Notes

follow me on tumblr for exact update schedules: [maladaptivewriting](https://maladaptivewriting.tumblr.com/). You can also follow me on tiktok under the same username.

the three broomsticks.

Chapter Notes

if you are just reading this update, you might have noticed that this fic went from being "mature" to "explicit." i made this change for two reasons. one, there will be graphic depictions of violence later on. two, there will be explicit sexual content even later than that.

actually, i did for three reasons, i asked on my tumblr if i should make this story explicit and the only answers i received said yes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Remus had not expected to enjoy living in the Three Broomsticks, yet it was the most comfortable he had felt in years. Since that fateful Halloween night more than a decade prior, Remus had been jumping from one place to another, never willing to stay anywhere long. Not that he had the money or ability to remain in one location forever. He was always running, trying to escape the grief that threatened to bury him at any given moment.

When he was asked to come back to Hogwarts, he had thought about the offer of a clean bed and a warm meal multiple times a day, plus pay which was just fantastic. He had tried very hard not to think about how difficult it would be to walk the halls that he and his friends once haunted. Every moment in Hogwarts was like trying to breathe in smoke, choking and coughing even as he strained to get a clear moment.

Living in Grimmauld Place was just bizarre. Remus spent a good chunk of his time there thinking about the terrible childhood Sirius had to endure, remembering the way he would come back to school, a little too thin and flinching just a bit too often. It always made something awful and possessive and altogether too wolfy rise up in him. Especially before they started dating, when Remus couldn't express his possessiveness in any way except by staring at Sirius too long, and then avoiding him when he was forced to swallow down a growl.

He spent the rest of his time at Grimmauld avoiding Sirius once again, just like before, he would stare at his face a little too long, linger a minute more than was acceptable, and then he would scramble out of the room. He felt stupid enduring the same dance that he had two decades before, but he wasn't sure how to move forward from where they were.

He left Sirius in Azkaban. Not once did he try to visit him. Not that he would have been able to, as Regulus was so kind to remind him, but he didn't even try. He had spent all that time just trying to survive, feeling like a wraith drifting through life waiting until death finally arrived, a welcome gift in a sea of torture.

But it wasn't torture, not really, not like Sirius had endured for all that time. Every time he thought about it, which was often, he would internally flinch. It was like being stabbed over and over again, each time the knife twisting a little further into his gut, tearing him open. He was trying to do the right thing now, trying not to overwhelm Sirius, trying to just take care of him. And Harry, of course.

Sirius was still Sirius though. He was sharp, quick, and strikingly handsome despite the time spent in that awful prison. He was shaky and he was hallucinating and unstable, but he was still himself. Remus should have realized a storm was brewing, but he was still so busy avoiding Sirius, that he missed all the signs.

By the time Sirius came at him, all razor-sharp edges and tempest, Remus was completely unprepared.

Before Sirius went to Azkaban, Remus had become very skilled at dealing with Sirius's mood swings. He could disarm him, wrap around him, and tie him up in knots in just a few maneuvers. Sirius would come at him with seething anger or earnest sadness or burning excitement and Remus would have him on his knees, tipsy off of Remus's tender care and adoration. Everyone else found Sirius so overwhelming, but Remus knew just how to play him.

He was just out of practice.

Sirius was itching for a fight and instead of knocking the wind out of his sails, or dismantling the sails altogether, making Sirius help him put the sails away, tucking them under the bed for another day, Remus engaged. He let Sirius push him and he let his own emotions take control, pushing his good sense out of the driver's seat, and when all was said and done, he practically ran out of the house.

He didn't go far. Just down the street, tucking himself into an alley and letting himself get consumed by the panic attack that had been building for weeks. After that was finished, marking off his to-do list, he walked to a small store nearby, bought a pack of cigarettes, and chain-smoked all of them, before ambling back to Grimmauld smelling horrible and feeling even worse.

"Sirius!" he called out the moment the door was shut behind him, but he could sense that he was gone. He didn't know how, but he could always feel Sirius like his magic was folded into the air and Remus was just swimming through it.

He found the letter Sirius left for him in the kitchen, a quick note telling him that Harry's name had been drawn, whatever that meant, and that Sirius wanted to be close by. It wasn't till the next morning that he realized Sirius was referring to the Triwizard Tournament. The realization of what was happening — had happened — to Harry derailed him, and despite their fight, he understood why Sirius had to go, why he felt the need to be close to Hogwarts.

He wasn't sure what to do with himself, he lingered around Grimmauld for about half a day before realizing he couldn't stay there and headed back to his father's old house. His father had died the same year Sirius went to prison, only a few weeks later, and Remus was too consumed with grief over Lily, James, and Sirius to even bother grieving over his father, not

that he would have done so given the chance. He held onto his house, living there periodically over the years, but he could never stay there long. It felt how Grimmauld must have felt to Sirius, suffocating and horrible.

He was ashamed to say that he was utterly useless until a week or so later when an owl arrived, knocking him out of his brooding. The owl was carrying a letter and a small pouch with way too many Galleons.

Lupin,

Harry is being forced to compete in the Triwizard Tournament, as I am sure you are aware. Not that Harry has mentioned you reaching out, I am certain you have just been terribly occupied, but perhaps you might speak to him when your busy schedule allows.

My brother has moved into a cave near Hogsmeade. I included directions at the end of this letter. He is living there, for the time being, and he will be needing a wand. I would go for it myself, and will if you are incapable, but it would be greatly appreciated if you could use the money I have provided to do this on your own.

I will not ask what happened between the two of you, because I do not care, but he should not be left alone. Surely you can see that.

I never get much time to go out to Hogsmeade, fourth year is as busy as any, but I felt it might be for the best to have a spare room there. Perhaps you can check on it for me. Rosmerta can give you a key.

R.A.B.

Regulus could be so dramatic, Remus thought, shaking his head. He hated the fond feeling that came now when he thought about Sirius's little brother. He barely knew anything about him at Hogwarts. The only Regulus Remus ever encountered was the one intent on riling Sirius up, fighting with him in the hallways, and ignoring him for weeks and months on end. Remus never had a high opinion of the boy.

When Regulus died, Sirius crumbled. The poorly built foundations of Sirius's well-being washed away in the tide Regulus's shocking death brought on. Remus could still vividly remember showing up at James and Lily's house to find Sirius curled up on the ground, his face red and blotchy with tears, looking at Remus like a starving man begging for a savior.

Remus did what he could for Sirius, held him close, distracted him when he was able to, and made sure he ate and washed and left the house periodically, but once those difficult months passed, Sirius became a firestorm of uncontrollable rage. Remus could still recall the horrible fear he felt every day, that Sirius was going to go too far and get himself killed.

Of course, everything came tumbling down when James and Lily were killed, but by then, Remus had all but forgotten about Regulus's death.

The Regulus he knew now was very different from the one he briefly encountered years before. He was sad and soft, still contained and controlled, but not quite as mean, like all the

hurt he'd felt as a child had filtered out over the years. Most surprising was the way he looked at Harry, like a father watching his son, carefully counting his steps to make sure he never fell. It was clear that he cared about Harry fiercely, with a kind of irate affection that Remus had only ever encountered in wild animals.

It was sweet. Sort of. Mostly it was terrifying. Regulus had high standards, and Remus constantly felt like he was falling short of them. He had felt guilty about it all summer, but now he was trying to mitigate his own self-hatred. He didn't see it as very useful given what they were up against. He could feel bad about himself once they destroyed all the Horcruxes.

"Rosmerta, hello," Remus greeted as he entered into the nearly empty Three Broomsticks. It was still very early, the Hogwarts students not yet headed to Hogsmeade, so the inn was almost completely barren, only a few customers tucked away at the corner table.

"Mornin' Remus," Rosmerta replied. She was as beautiful as ever, and though he had interacted with her briefly during his year as a Hogwarts professor, he still found it odd to be greeted by his first name by her. "Here to check in?"

"Yes, I —" He wanted to explain, to elaborate on why a fourteen-year-old might be paying for his semi-permanent stay, but she just ducked down behind the counter and came back with a large key.

"You're in the top room," she said sweetly. "Your breakfasts and dinners are all paid for while you're here. Do you want them brought up to the room or will you take them down here?"

"My breakfasts and — what?" he asked, bewildered.

"Sorry, he didn't mention anything about lunch," Rosmerta said regretfully.

"No, no, that's fine," Remus said, waving her off.

He climbed the stairs to the private room on the top floor. There were only a handful of rooms at the Three Broomsticks, but only one at the very top. It was clean and cozy, a fire already burning in the fireplace. Remus set down his trunk, full of the few clothes he owned, and looked around the room feeling baffled. Regulus had gone to the trouble to book him this room, and pay for two meals a day just so Remus would be nearby, just so Remus could take care of Sirius. He knew Regulus had changed, but this was far more than he expected.

He was only in the room for a bit before heading out toward Ollivander's. The wand shop had a small location in Hogsmeade, a convenience that Remus appreciated. He didn't feel like dealing with the bustle and insanity of Diagon Alley. The man who ran this Ollivander's was young, maybe only twenty-five, but he was nice and didn't ask any questions about why Remus was buying a new wand.

There was no way for Sirius to come and try out the wands himself, so he just aimed to get one that worked for himself. Sirius hadn't had any trouble using Remus's wand over the summer, so he figured this would work just fine. He left the shop feeling an odd sense of accomplishment, though in reality, he had done very little.

Hogsmeade was comfortable and welcoming, like coming home. He hadn't felt this way at Hogwarts, but now he felt it. The way the cold Scottish wind blew through the city made Remus feel, for a moment, like nothing bad had ever happened to him, like he was settled in life, like he was happy.

He went back to the Three Broomsticks, ordering a bunch of food that he packaged together along with a few extra items of clothing he had picked up that morning, and began the slow hike to the cave. He took his time, doubling back and walking in various directions to make sure that no one was following him before he finally came upon it.

"Sirius," he called. Sirius looked up quickly. Remus had been wondering if Regulus would tell Sirius that he was coming, but the clear surprise on Sirius's face answered that question for him. He looked thin. He always looked thin now, but he looked even smaller than he had in Grimmauld. Remus's chest ached.

"Remus," Sirius croaked, his voice still damaged after all those years. Remus wondered if there was a way to help him, if he could cure him. He would have to look it up.

Their conversation was short, carrying on without touching too many heavy topics, before Remus started nearly force-feeding Sirius the food he brought. Over the summer, Sirius hadn't been able to eat. Remus didn't think that he experienced hunger cues the same way after starving for so long, and he had felt so out of his depth that he didn't quite know how to help him.

He didn't feel that way now. He wasn't sure what exactly had changed, but he thought that perhaps some of Regulus's forcefulness had rubbed off on him. He unpacked the food for Sirius and made him eat until Sirius looked like he might get sick. Sirius didn't complain though, just watched Remus with that soft, gutted look that he wore so often now, like he couldn't believe that Remus cared enough to make sure he was eating.

By the time he left the cave, Sirius was half asleep, the food causing his already weak body to drag him into rest. He cast a few warming charms on the clothes Sirius had, as well as Sirius himself, and headed back to Hogsmeade. He felt better and worse having seen Sirius. He felt better knowing that he was fed and that he was safe, at least as safe as he could be given the circumstances.

He felt worse though because seeing Sirius suffer, even for a moment, was like reliving all of his worst memories, one on top of the other, all piled high in his thoughts, crushing him beneath the weight of it. He spent most of the evening making a plan for how often he could go up to see Sirius without it being suspicious and for all the things he could do to help him in the meantime.

He made sure to write Harry as well. Regulus hadn't been subtle in mentioning that Remus needed to reach out to him. Harry had the mirror and would be able to talk to Sirius whenever he wanted, not to mention the fact that he lived with Regulus, but Remus was the only one of the three who had the capability to act like an adult in public. He could support Harry in ways that Sirius and Regulus couldn't, and he needed to start acting like it.

The Monday after Hogsmeade weekend, Remus went for a long walk around Hogsmeade. He thought about going up to the cave, but he didn't want to risk it. There were already people coming into town for the first task of the Triwizard Tournament, and Remus couldn't be sure that he wasn't being watched.

He ended up staying out late, only heading back to the Three Broomsticks when it was getting dark. He was passing by a few of the small houses, moseying up the road slowly, when a black dog caught his eye. He did a double-take before realizing that he was in fact seeing what he thought he was seeing.

Sirius was sitting between two homes, half covered with shadows, watching Remus with his piercing gaze. Remus looked around quickly, cast a very strong Disillusionment charm on Padfoot, and walked over to him in the least suspicious way possible.

"What are you doing here?" Remus whispered furiously. Padfoot didn't answer, of course, but he came forward and brushed his nose against Remus's leg before trotting off toward the Three Broomsticks.

Remus followed him warily, hoping that his spell wouldn't fail. Sirius was still a wanted man, and there was no doubt in Remus's mind that some of their enemies now knew that Sirius was an Animagus. With Peter out there, most likely returned to Voldemort's side, someone had to know.

No one gave Sirius even a passing glance as they walked through, and Remus could do little else except follow him into the Three Broomsticks, Sirius slipping through the front doors when an elderly couple was exiting. Sirius headed right up the stairs the moment he was inside, and Remus moved to follow him but was interrupted by Rosmerta.

"You're back," she said cheerfully. "Are you here for dinner?"

"Oh, err," Remus said, uncertainly. "I'll just take it up to my room if that's all right?"

"Sure, want me to bring it up for you?"

"No!" Remus said, perhaps a bit too loudly. "No, thank you. I'll do it myself."

She gave him an odd look but nodded. He had to wait a few minutes for her to bring him a tray of food, a warm and fragrant stew along with two rolls. He thanked her and headed quickly up the stairs.

Padfoot was right by the door to his room, his head cocked curiously.

"Sorry," Remus said. "I didn't want her to disturb us."

He unlocked the door and watched as Padfoot's skinny frame slipped through a second later. Remus walked in and placed the tray of food on the table near the fire, casting a quick stasis charm on it to keep it warm. He wondered if he would be able to convince Sirius to eat it.

"What's going on?" Remus said, turning back just in time to see Sirius transform. Sirius, however, looked just as confused as Remus felt. He shrugged and turned slightly to look at

the empty space near the door. Remus should have realized.

The air shimmered slightly and then Regulus appeared, pulling James's, now Harry's, invisibility cloak off and tucking it away. Regulus's face was tight with stress, dark circles hung under his light gray eyes, his cheeks slightly hollow like he hadn't been eating well.

"We need to talk," Regulus said. Even his voice didn't sound right, there was a sharpness to him that felt painful.

Sirius sat down in one of the two chairs next to the fire, brushing his tangled hair out of his eyes. Regulus breathed a heavy sigh but didn't move from where he stood near the door, running a finger through his too-long hair.

"Okay," Remus said slowly when Regulus didn't continue.

"I believe someone — the Dark — You-Know-Who is using the tournament to get to Harry. I don't know how, but I think Harry competing is part of his plan," Regulus said stiffly.

Sirius nodded, though he looked curious. "How though? To what end?"

"I don't know," Regulus said. Remus was surprised to hear the open frustration in his voice. "But someone orchestrated this and whoever it was, they're doing it on You-Know-Who's orders."

"Why now?" Remus asked.

Regulus sighed again, looking a little defeated. His eyes drifted toward the bed like he was watching someone, but he glanced away quickly. "He's getting more powerful. We knew he was still alive, out there somewhere, but I think he's close to coming back. I just can't figure out how he's doing it."

"How do you know this?" Sirius asked. Remus was suddenly sure that he had missed something. Sirius was looking at Regulus with suspicion. It wasn't quite distrust, but like he knew Regulus was purposefully leaving something out.

Regulus looked over at the bed again and clenched his teeth tightly. Remus thought he noticed him shake his head, just slightly, but he couldn't figure out why.

"Regulus," Sirius said sharply.

"Snape told me," Regulus said, sounding almost regretful.

"You're getting this information from Snivellus?" Sirius said loudly. Regulus shushed him, though through clenched teeth so that it almost sounded like a cat hissing. "We can't trust him."

"Maybe not," Regulus conceded. Remus could see the tension around his eyes, it was like he had already had this argument and was being forced to have it again. "But he is useful."

“What did he tell you?” Remus said, purposefully interrupting whatever scathing remark Sirius was about to make. Regulus gave him a look of relief.

“His Dark Mark had faded over the years, but now it’s growing darker. He says that he felt it move two nights ago. There is only one reason that would be happening.”

“Voldemort is gaining power,” Remus said quietly.

“How does the tournament play into this?” Sirius asked, his mouth pulled down into a frown.

“I’m not sure, but I feel like someone is planning something related to it. I thought at first it was just to hurt Harry, but now, I can’t be sure.”

“Is there any way he can get out of it? Drop out of the tournament or something?” Remus asked.

Regulus shook his head. “No, but I — I have a plan,” Regulus said, his eyes drifting to the bed again before closing quickly.

“What plan?” Sirius asked.

“I don’t want to go into it now. I’ll deal with the tournament, what I need is for you two to start working on finding the other Horcruxes,” Regulus said. His arms were crossed tightly across his chest, his fingers digging into his biceps.

Regulus didn’t have much else to offer them, besides the advice to reach out to Dumbledore. “The locket I destroyed, do you still have it?”

“Yes,” Sirius said. Remus knew he had been keeping it close.

“It might help you,” Regulus said. “I’ve been thinking, what if it belonged to someone important? If we can track how he got it, then it might help us figure out what the others are.”

Sirius nodded solemnly.

“I need to get back,” Regulus said.

“What about the first task? Do you know what it is yet?” Sirius asked.

Regulus cringed. “Yes,” he said but didn’t elaborate. Sirius raised his eyebrows questioningly, but Regulus just looked away.

“I want to be there.”

“No, Sirius,” Regulus said.

“That’s not a good idea,” Remus said at the same time.

“If something is going on, I want to be there,” Sirius said, and Remus could already feel a fight brewing in him. He wouldn’t budge on this. Remus could already see it.

“What if someone sees you? The Grim walking around the Triwizard Tournament is sure to draw attention,” Remus said.

“What if I wore the cloak?” Sirius asked, but Regulus shook his head quickly.

“Moody can see through it,” Regulus replied.

“How?” Remus asked.

“I don’t know, that eye of his,” Regulus said, waving his hand around, but Remus could see the way his shoulders tightened. “You can’t go, Sirius. It’s not safe for you and if something happened to you, Harry would be devastated.”

Remus had to fight not to laugh. It was more than obvious to him that Regulus would not handle Sirius getting hurt well, but the way he shelved his own feelings off onto Harry was comical. Not that Harry wouldn’t be upset, he was clearly a sensitive kid and he had grown very attached to Sirius over the summer, both of them making up for lost time.

Sirius didn’t argue with Regulus, but he didn’t agree either. Remus was already preparing himself for the conversation they would have after Regulus left. Regulus pulled the invisibility cloak out, but didn’t put it on right away, instead, he stared down at it, kneading it nervously between his fingers.

“Things are only going to get more dangerous from here,” Regulus muttered. “I’m trying to keep Harry safe, but —” Regulus swallowed harshly.

“We know,” Remus said softly. “We’re with you. Both of you.”

Regulus looked at him, his shoulders dropping slightly, a grateful gleam in his eye.

Sirius watched Regulus leave with an odd look on his face and was quiet for a few long minutes after the door shut.

“Have you eaten?” Remus asked, mostly to break the silence.

“I have to go to the tournament,” Sirius said in reply. Remus sighed.

“I know,” Remus said. Sirius’s eyebrows raised in shock. “I have an idea, but you’re not going to like it.” Sirius, to Remus’s surprise, smirked at him. Suddenly, an awkward look crossed his face.

“Erm,” Sirius said before clearing his throat. “I have to ask you something.”

“Yes?” Remus said curiously.

“James,” Sirius said, pausing to cough again, “he wasn’t in the room with us, was he?”

“Just now?” Remus asked. Sirius nodded. “No, he wasn’t.”

Sirius nodded again. “Okay, that’s what I thought. But it looked like...”

“Like what?” Remus said. Sirius shook his head.

“It doesn't matter,” Sirius said quickly. “Anyways, what’s your idea?”

Chapter End Notes

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the first task.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sirius knew that Regulus would not be happy to see him, but he had to be there.

Regulus refused to tell him what the first task was, and when Sirius finally managed to talk to Harry through the mirror, Harry was just as tight-lipped.

“What are they expecting you to do?” Sirius asked. Harry was in the common room, though it was late enough that no one else was up. Sirius wondered vaguely where Regulus was, but Harry didn’t mention it, so Sirius didn’t bring it up.

Harry looked away quickly when Sirius asked about the task, a slightly guilty expression on his face.

“I’m not sure,” Harry mumbled, his shoulders moving in an aborted shrug.

“Harry,” Sirius said with a sigh. “What did Regulus tell you?”

Harry shrugged again, and Sirius could already see that he wasn't getting any more information out of the kid. Traitor. Sirius let it go, more for Harry’s sake than anything and changed the subject. Harry looked so relieved that Sirius felt guilty for even asking.

They talked for a while after that, Harry spent most of the conversation complaining about Ron again. Sirius could see how much it was bothering him that his best friend wouldn’t speak to him. He knew that pain well, the months he spent without Remus and James during his fifth year painfully clear in his memories.

Sirius had been antsy since that conversation though. Remus told him that he had a plan to help Sirius attend the task, but he had yet to hear what that plan might be, and he was a little nervous.

“Sirius,” Remus said softly. Sirius was in the middle of pacing around the cave when Remus entered, he was dressed in a soft sweater, a pair of worn-out old trousers, and a long coat that Sirius had never seen before. No person had any right looking that delectable dressed in a sweater, but somehow Remus pulled it off.

“Let’s go,” Sirius said after a moment, still a little caught up in taking Remus in.

“Hold on,” Remus said. Something clenched harshly in Sirius’s chest and he ground his teeth together.

“I’m not staying back,” Sirius said. “I already said I wouldn’t interfere, but I have to be there.” Remus threw his hands up in surrender.

“I know that,” Remus said. “But we need to give you a disguise.”

Sirius looked at him uncertainly. "I was just going to go as Padfoot," he said.

Remus nodded. "I'm not disagreeing with that plan. The less you can speak, the better."

Sirius chuckled. "Thanks ever so," Sirius replied, he tried to sound grumpy, but the smile tugging at his lips ruined it. Remus smirked at him.

"There could be people who know what Padfoot looks like, so I'm going to transfigure you," Remus said.

"Good idea," Sirius said, but something was still tugging at him. He almost didn't want to ask. "Why did you say I wasn't going to like this plan?"

Remus's smirk widened even further, though he was clearly trying to tamp it down. "You'll have to be on a lead," Remus said.

"A lead?" Sirius asked, his mouth falling open slightly.

"You'll draw more attention as a loose dog, you're too big to blend in," Remus said.

"So I'm going as your pet?" Sirius interrupted and immediately felt himself blush at the words. Remus was clearly trying not to laugh.

"It's just for a few hours," Remus said placatingly.

A younger version of Sirius might have said something scathing or sarcastic. *If you wanted me on a leash, Moony, you could have just said so.* That version of Sirius was long buried, out of sight and out of mind. Besides, this Moony wouldn't want to hear that, and Sirius was trying very hard not to rock the boat.

"Fine," he grumbled. He wasn't really that bothered by it. It was a tad degrading, sure, but at least it was Remus with him. He's not sure he would let anyone else do it.

He transformed into Padfoot, melting into the comfort of his Animagus form with the ease of having done it for years and years. He loved the way Remus looked when he was Padfoot. There was no pain, rejection, or grief, just a simple, unending, and uninterrupted love that echoed in his thoughts to a chorus of *mine, mine, mine*. He would be embarrassed about it once he was human again, but for now, he didn't mind.

Remus pulled out his wand, a look of focused concentration on his face, and began the transfiguration. Sirius couldn't even feel it happen, though he did notice the appearance of a second tail once Remus pulled away. He was making Sirius look like a crup.

His Remus was so brilliant. It was very uncommon, probably impossible, for wizards to turn into magical animals when becoming an Animagus. There were some legends about the original founders of Hogwarts, that they could turn into magical creatures, but Sirius had never been able to find evidence of that. So making him look like a crup was a brilliant way to distract people from the presence of an animal.

Remus attached the lead to him as they started walking into Hogsmeade and Sirius quickly bumped his hand so that he knew it was okay. It wasn't ideal, but he knew his Remus was just trying to keep him safe. The road to Hogwarts was more packed than Sirius had ever seen it. He kept close to Remus's side, overwhelmed by the sheer number of bodies, let alone smells, present in the crowd.

They headed right for the champions' tent, Remus intending on speaking to Harry before the task began, but right before they arrived someone jumped in front of them.

"No," Regulus said, his voice tense with obvious stress and anxiety. "No, he cannot be here." He smelled like fear.

"He was going to come either way," Remus whispered. "I'll make sure he doesn't interfere." Regulus glared at Remus. Sirius had witnessed lesser men cower in the face of that anger, but Remus just looked back impassible. He supposed that he'd had a lot of practice given all the years he spent dealing with Sirius.

"If you so much as bark, I'm going to hex you blind," Regulus said to Sirius, speaking through gritted teeth. Sirius walked as far forward as he could and rubbed his face against Regulus's thigh. He hated how tense his little brother seemed. Regulus sighed quietly.

"How's Harry?" Remus asked.

"Nervous," Regulus said. People were piling into the stands quickly now.

"Who is that?" Remus whispered. Regulus turned to look as a man pulled Harry out of the tent and began speaking to him quietly. Regulus pursed his lips.

"Bagman," Regulus said. "He shouldn't be talking to Harry alone. I'll meet you both in the stands." He walked stiffly over to the two of them, interrupting whatever the man had been saying. Harry didn't bother to stop him, instead just watching Regulus as he took over the conversation.

A loud whistle was blown. "Come on," Remus said and began walking to the stands. Sirius noticed a few people gasp when they noticed him walk by, but he paid them no mind. No one tried to interfere or stop them, though Sirius did notice more than a few students waved excitedly at Remus. He was popular.

"Hello, Professor Lupin," a quiet, melodic voice said, just as they arrived at their spot in the stands.

"Just Remus is fine, I'm not your professor anymore, Luna," Remus said, a clear smile in his voice. "Hello, Hermione," Remus greeted as Hermione came to stand next to Luna. She smiled brightly at Remus.

"Okay," Luna replied. "May I pet your crup?" Sirius looked up just as Remus looked down at him. Remus was grinning mischievously.

“Of course,” Remus replied. “Be nice,” he mumbled to Sirius just as Luna reached out a hand and touched Sirius on the snout, scratching him lightly. Sirius rubbed his face up against her small hand, snuffling pleasantly.

Just then, everyone began cheering and gasping. Sirius couldn’t see anything from where he sat at Remus’s feet so he climbed up onto the stands next to him. The other Hogwarts champion had just come out into the arena. Sirius couldn’t remember his name. He had not been paying attention to the arena before, but now he noticed what everyone was gasping at.

Faced across from the champion was a dragon. A real dragon. Sirius felt more than saw Remus stiffen beside him.

“They have to face a dragon?” Remus breathed.

“They have to steal a golden egg from her,” Regulus answered. Sirius hadn’t noticed him come up next to him.

“They have to — how?” Remus asked, dismayed.

“However they can,” Regulus said, there was a smirk in his voice, but Sirius could hear the strain behind it. He nudged Regulus, noticing the way he watched the other Hogwarts champion like a hawk. Regulus reached out a hand and began scratching behind one of Sirius’s ears. Sirius didn’t think Regulus even realized he was doing it.

The Hogwarts champion worked quickly, transfiguring one of the boulders in the arena into a Labrador dog to distract the dragon so that he could steal the egg.

“Wonder what kind of dragon that is,” Remus muttered.

“It’s a Swedish Short-Snout,” Luna responded happily. “They breathe blue fire.” Just as she said it, the Short-Snout did just that, catching the champion across his arm. He cried out but still managed to get the egg and scamper away.

“Very good indeed!” Bagman shouted. “And now the marks from the judges!”

“Who are the judges?” Remus asked, leaning over to speak to Regulus, who was still petting Sirius slowly. Sirius was enjoying it far too much, the gentled press of Regulus’s hand making his eyes droop tiredly.

“Bagman, he works for the Department of Magical Games and Sports, the three headmasters and headmistress of the schools, Dumbledore, Karkaroff, and Maxime, and then Crouch,” Regulus said.

“Forgot about him,” Remus muttered. Sirius felt Regulus’s fingers tense in his fur for a second before relaxing and going back to petting him.

The next champion came out quickly after the first. Sirius was pretty sure her name was Fleur, the Beauxbatons champion. She trembled from head to foot as she walked out into the arena, the new dragon already there waiting. She charmed the dragon, a Common Welsh Green Luna informed them, into some kind of trance. Sirius didn’t recognize the spell. She

was able to get her egg relatively easily, though her robes caught on fire when the dragon breathed a lick of fire while snoring.

“That was impressive spellwork,” Remus said quietly.

“Fleur is very talented,” Luna replied.

“What is Harry going to do?” Remus asked. Regulus gripped Sirius’s fur again but didn’t reply.

The next champion, Viktor Krum, had a much more violent approach to stealing his egg. He cast a Conjunctivitis Curse on the dragon, and although it made it harder for the dragon to spot him, the dragon thrashed around so much that it damaged the other eggs in its nest. The crowd was much louder during his turn than they were for the other two, invigorated by the excitement.

Just like that, Harry was up next. Regulus was scratching at Sirius’s fur so roughly that it almost hurt, but he did his best not to react. He thought that he might be calming Regulus down a bit, keeping him from turning that stress inward as he so often did as a child. If it kept him from imploding then it was worth a little bit of pain.

“What kind of dragon is that?” Remus asked as the dragon was brought out into the arena.

“A Hungarian Horntail,” Regulus responded tightly.

“They’re the most dangerous breed of dragon,” Luna said, a deep frown edged on her pale face.

“Oh,” Remus responded. Sirius knew that if he was human he would be feeling the same stress that everyone else was, but all he felt was concern about keeping Remus and Regulus calm. He leaned into Regulus’s side, and Regulus unconsciously put his arm around Sirius.

Harry walked out into the arena, looking much smaller than all of the other champions. Regulus stopped breathing. Harry moved quickly, sprinting to the side of the arena before the dragon could even see him. He cast a spell over himself, but Sirius couldn’t tell what it was.

“What did he just do?” Remus asked as if he could hear what Sirius was thinking. Regulus’s lips twitched slightly.

“He cast *Aromullus*,” Regulus said. “It’s used to keep scents from spreading. Dragons primarily use their sense of smell to find prey, this will keep the dragon from smelling Harry.”

Harry tucked himself behind a boulder in a way where the dragon couldn’t see him, but most of the people in the stands could. He settled down on the ground, leaning against the boulder.

“I’m confused,” Remus admitted after a few long seconds.

“Whoever entered Harry into this tournament wanted a show,” Regulus whispered. Sirius could practically feel his rage. “We’re not going to give it to them.”

“That’s very smart,” Luna said. “The dragon won’t attack unless Harry tries to get the egg.”

“Exactly,” Regulus said smugly before sitting down on the bench as if settling in for a long wait.

And a long wait it was. The crowd was tense with anticipation at first, but soon even the dragon settled in with boredom. Harry stayed where he was, tapping his foot occasionally and practicing a few spells with his wand. The crowd grew restless after a while, conversations breaking out here and there as people slowly lost interest in the performance before them.

The Weasley Twins, who had been gathering bets before the task even started, were now loudly taking bets on how long people thought Harry’s turn would go on. Hermione just shook her head at them, but Luna beaconsed them over to place a bet for twelve hours. Remus declined to place a bet as well, though he was laughing as he did it, clearly charmed by the twins.

Sirius watched the judges closely. Bagman looked like the world around him was collapsing, a face of panic that only grew stronger as the minutes ticked by. Crouch, Karkaroff, and Maxime all just looked annoyed. Dumbledore had a bland, cheerful look on his face, but Sirius was almost certain that the man was working hard not to laugh.

Sirius couldn't deny that he found it funny as well. It wasn't a plan he would have ever come up with, but Regulus and Harry executed it well. Watching the crowd grow disinterested was unusually satisfying. But Regulus was right, they all just wanted to watch the Boy-Who-Lived go through the tasks, and with Harry refusing to comply, they got nothing.

“This is going on for quite a long time,” a boy spoke suddenly. He had just walked up to them and settled next to Regulus on the stands. Regulus stiffened slightly, but Sirius couldn't figure out why. Sirius watched him closely and noticed a slight blush spread across Regulus's face.

“Yes, that's the idea, I think,” Regulus replied rigidly. The boy seemed unbothered by Regulus's rudeness. Sirius couldn't figure out if he knew him, but given his French accent, he would guess not.

“Why isn't he trying to get the egg?” the boy asked.

“He's protesting,” Regulus responded. The boy turned his blue eyes on Regulus, before they drifted to Sirius, who was now laying down on the bench, his head resting in Remus's lap. He seemed curious, but Sirius was relieved when he didn't ask.

“How long do you think they will let this go on?” the boy asked.

“Who knows?” Regulus responded though he was smiling now. It was more of an evil smile, Sirius thought.

The boy stayed next to Regulus for another twenty minutes or so, though they didn't talk much. “I must go find my friends again,” the boy said when he stood to leave. “See you later, Regulus.” He reached out almost like he was going to touch Regulus before dropping his hand and walking away.

“Who was that?” Remus asked, Sirius could hear the way he was trying to keep his tone light and conversational.

“No one,” Regulus said.

“Alexander,” Luna said at the same time. Regulus’s head snapped over to look at her. Sirius lifted his head curiously. “He’s taking Regulus to the Yule Ball.”

“Luna,” Regulus hissed warningly, but Luna just looked at him inquisitively. Hermione snickered next to Luna, but she seemed pleased.

“Oh?” Remus responded with a tiny laugh in his voice. Regulus’s face turned fiercely red, but he just looked away, his eyes once again glued to Harry who was still leaning against the boulder.

At one point, Sirius noticed Hermione stand up when Ron waved at her. She squeezed Regulus’s shoulder comfortingly as she passed and he gave her a small smile. Sirius watched as Hermione and Ron whispered to each other, too far away to hear what they were saying, but Ron kept looking at Regulus, a frown pulling at his lips. Hermione kept gesturing over at Regulus, but eventually, the two of them left together without speaking to him.

Sirius couldn’t say how long the task went on for. He was a bit embarrassed to admit that he fell asleep at one point, his head tucked against Remus’s warm thigh and with Regulus periodically petting him. When he woke up, the sun was setting and most of the stands were empty. Harry was still by the boulder, resting his head back on his folded hands, his eyes closed. Regulus was still watching him closely, his back just as tense as before.

“Surely there is going to be some end to this,” Remus said tiredly. Sirius scooted closer to the man. He could see from the way that he was sitting that Remus was uncomfortable from being in the stands for so long. Remus scratched him absentmindedly. “Good nap?”

Sirius huffed in response. Luna was no longer with them, Sirius guessed she must have left while he was snoozing.

It was completely dark by the time someone finally intervened. Dumbledore stood from where he was sitting with the remaining judges, only Bagman and Crouch, the other two having left already, and waved over the dragon’s keepers.

“Attention,” Dumbledore called. “This marks the end of the first task.” Sirius didn’t hear what else was said, as both Remus and Regulus stood up as they watched the keepers take the dragon away. Harry waited quietly until Dumbledore finally waved him over. Regulus was moving before Harry even had a chance to stand.

Sirius noticed Moody standing next to Dumbledore, Bagman, and Crouch as he and Remus followed Regulus down to speak to them. Moody was watching Harry with a keen look in his eye, and when he spotted Sirius his head shook slightly, it looked almost like an involuntary twitch.

“Gentlemen,” Dumbledore greeted.

“Am I done?” Harry interrupted, his voice scratchy as if he had just woken up. He was rubbing his face tiredly.

“They just called it,” Regulus answered.

“I didn’t know you had a crup,” Harry said suddenly, instantly squatting down to pet Sirius’s head. Sirius leaned into him happily, licking his nose once causing Harry to laugh.

“Yes, I just adopted him,” Remus responded.

“Harry, lad, what happened?” Bagman interrupted. “I thought you said you had a plan.”

“I did,” Harry responded, still squatting, but Sirius noticed the way his expression closed off when he realized he was being watched.

“You didn’t manage to get your golden egg,” Bagman practically yelled. Harry finally stood, shrugging as he did.

“Oh, well,” Harry said easily before smiling at Regulus. Regulus smirked back, looking terribly smug.

“This was your plan then, Black?” Moody said gruffly, Regulus turned to look at him with so much venom in his glare that Sirius thought Moody should have started melting on the spot.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Regulus said sharply.

“Now, now,” Dumbledore said placatingly. “This was completely fair game. The rules state that Harry merely needed to appear in the arena, not that he had to complete the task to move on.”

“But what is he going to do about the next task?” Bagman said, alarmed. “Maybe I could...”

“It’s fine,” Harry said. “I’ll figure something out.”

“No, no, you don’t understand,” Bagman continued.

“He said he’s fine,” Regulus said sternly.

“I believe that is all for the evening,” Dumbledore said.

“Great,” Regulus said with false cheer. “Come on.” He wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders, he was slightly taller than Harry, though Sirius wasn’t sure when that happened. He all but dragged Harry away.

“Where is Rita?” Bagman asked.

“I’m not sure,” Dumbledore responded, sounding altogether too innocent. “Perhaps she left.”

“Albus,” Remus said once Crouch and Bagman finally walked away. “I need to speak with you in private if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, of course,” Dumbledore said easily. Moody was watching the exchange with intense interest, but Dumbledore waved him off. “Come to my office.”

Chapter End Notes

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the party.

Chapter Notes

uploading a day early because i love you

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Regulus felt extremely proud of himself. He could barely believe that his plan worked out so well. He thought for sure something would go wrong.

In the week leading up to the first task, it seemed like the walls were closing in on him from all sides. He was sure that he hadn't taken a full breath in days, each mouthful interrupted by the collapsing of his lungs under such immense pressure. He was trying to keep it together, for Harry at least.

Harry took it all in stride, though Regulus could tell that he was nervous. Despite his nerves, not once did Harry lash out. Regulus told him he would figure something out, and Harry believed him. Things were a bit weird when Moody pulled Harry into his office with the explicit purpose of giving Harry help that he was not supposed to have.

Regulus was very close to storming into Moody's office and demanding to know what the hell he was thinking. The only reason he didn't was because of James.

"Maybe he's just trying to be helpful." James was pacing the common room slowly, ambling back and forth on the bright red, ornate rugs. Regulus watched him from where he was curled up into a tight ball in front of the fire. "You said yourself that everyone knows Harry is playing at a disadvantage being so much younger than the other champions. Maybe Moody is just trying to give him a leg up."

"But why?" Regulus said. "Did Dumbledore tell him too? Why wouldn't he just tell me? It doesn't seem right." Regulus shook his head sharply. "I just wish I could figure out who put his name in that stupid goblet, then maybe I could figure out what they were planning."

"I thought you said they did it to hurt him," James said, turning once again to pace across the floor.

"Can you just sit down?" Regulus snapped. "You're driving me mad."

"Sorry." James sat down next to him, curling up his legs against his chest in a mirror image of how Regulus was sitting. "What is the other option?"

"What if they put him in the tournament because..." Regulus trailed off. He felt like it was right out of reach, like he should know the answer but for some reason, he didn't have access to it.

“Maybe they just want him to win,” James said with a smile that said *I’m trying very hard to distract you so you don’t tear off your skin in frustration*. “They want him to look talented in front of the world.”

Regulus chuckled quietly. “Maybe,” he conceded though they both knew that wasn’t what was going on. “I feel like someone is trying to push him through the tournament,” Regulus said. “Like they’re not trying to hurt him with it, but like they’re trying to get him to the end. I just can’t figure out why.”

“Why do you feel like that?” James asked quietly, tracking every micro-expression that crossed Regulus’s face with a closeness that Regulus would have found unsettling had it been anyone else doing it.

“Harry said Bagman was excited for him, and now with Moody trying to help him out,” Regulus said, “I’m not sure, it’s just how I feel.”

“Okay,” James said slowly. “Well, say you were Voldemort, how would you use the tournament?”

That wasn’t a way of thinking that Regulus particularly enjoyed, but it did open new avenues for him to use. “If Harry’s dream was really a vision, then it means the Dark Lord wants to kidnap him.”

“Right,” James said. Regulus could tell that James was purposefully withholding his judgment and doing his best to keep it to himself. It still bothered him though. That much was obvious. Regulus wondered if James was also thinking about that night he revealed that he had the Dark Mark. Regulus shook off the memory.

“But all the tasks happen on the grounds of Hogwarts. No part of the tournament happens anywhere else, so it’s not like he can use it to get Harry out of Hogwarts, right?”

“I don’t think so,” James said. “What about the winner’s ceremony?”

“I’m not sure,” Regulus said uncertainly.

“Maybe they’re just trying to embarrass him —”

“Or make a spectacle out of him?” Regulus interrupted.

“Could be,” James conceded. “I don’t know.”

Regulus growled in frustration. He hated feeling like this, like everything was just at the tip of his fingers, but he was unable to grasp it. James reached out and settled a hand in between Regulus’s shoulders. His hand wasn’t warm, not like it would be if he were alive, but he could still feel the pressure of it there against him and that was enough to calm him down.

It took another night of having the same conversation for something to click in his head. James was asking the same repertoire of questions as he had the night prior, but he was clearly growing frustrated as well. Regulus didn’t know if that frustration was aimed in his direction or not, but he felt it was all the same. He felt like he was failing Harry *and* James.

“I wish there was a way he could get out of it,” James said. “Protest or something.” James threw his hands in the air as he spoke, shaking them wildly and causing his fingers to dance around absurdly.

“Protest?” Regulus asked. He was laying flat on the ground this time, giving up on even bothering to sit.

“Yeah, like one time our Defense professor insisted on lecturing us all about werewolves and how dangerous they were, even when it wasn't the full moon, so me, Sirius, and Peter all left class in protest,” James said.

Regulus had to work not to snap at James for even saying Peter's name. He knew that James had been friends with the man at one point, but Regulus did not want to hear about him. If he came in contact with Peter Pettigrew ever again, he would tear Peter's throat out with his teeth.

“Not Remus?” Regulus asked. James looked slightly guilty.

“No, he thought it would be too suspicious,” James said. “Plus, he was so self-deprecating back then. Always going on and on about how werewolves probably deserves it and they were dangerous and he was a monster.” James rolled his eyes aggressively.

“I'm not sure his self-deprecation has changed much,” Regulus muttered.

“Werewolves aren't even scary,” James continued as if he hadn't heard Regulus speak. He probably hadn't, too caught up in his own thoughts.

“Really, James?” Regulus asked, raising his eyebrows questioningly. “Werewolves aren't scary?”

“Well, they're scary if you're a person, sure,” James said. “But I mean, when you're an animal they're just like big dogs really.”

Regulus continued to stare at him, not believing a single word he was saying.

“For instance,” James said, “one time we were all out in the forest and Moony started this ridiculous game where he would run away from us just to circle back and hide behind trees so he could jump out at Padfoot. Sirius got a real kick out of it, thought it was hilarious.”

“Maybe he was thinking about eating Padfoot,” Regulus said. “Don't werewolves eat rabbits and other small animals?”

James shrugged. “I don't know, but he wasn't trying to eat Padfoot. Moony loved Padfoot. The few times I spent the full moon with him without Sirius present, Moony was a nightmare. Searching the entire shack, sniffing every single corner, and digging at the walls. It was pathetic.”

“Is this about to be a lesson about werewolf mates, cause I don't think I want to hear that,” Regulus grumbled.

“I’m not sure if werewolves have mates,” James said.

“Well, given that you skipped Defense when they were teaching the subject, I’m not surprised you don’t know,” Regulus said.

“Do you know?” James asked, crouching down next to Regulus’s head excitedly.

“Let’s change the subject,” Regulus said sharply causing James to burst out laughing.

“Fine, fine,” James said once he got himself back under control. “What were we talking about again? Oh! Protests.”

“I don’t think Harry can just leave,” Regulus said. “That’s a little too close to not showing up. I don’t think a protest is worth damaging his magical core.”

“Yeah, suppose you’re right,” James mumbled, seeming far more solemn than he did a moment before. Regulus was almost sad to see the joyful, laughing face go. He wished he could just stay in that moment, watching James chuckle happily. He wished he could pause it, cast a Stasis Charm on it, and let it live there forever.

“What if he didn’t leave?” Regulus said quietly, more to himself than James. “What if he stayed in the arena, but he didn’t participate? Would that still be a protest?”

“What do you mean?” James asked.

“If I can find a way to disguise him or hide him, then he could stay away from the dragon. He wouldn’t have to engage and anyone hoping to watch him get hurt or trying to push him along to the next task doesn’t get what they want.”

It was that realization that led to the plan, the plan that had gone off without a hitch. Harry hadn’t even stolen his golden egg, though hours had passed since he entered the arena. Of course, this meant they knew even less about the next task, but Regulus didn’t care. Their plan would remain the same. Stay out of the way and don’t participate.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Harry said cheerfully as they walked back to the dorm. The castle was nearly empty by that point, most of the students had abandoned the task long before Dumbledore called it. “I wonder what Rita will have to say about this.”

Regulus snickered. “I’m dying to know,” he said sardonically causing Harry to laugh.

Regulus knew this was far from over, the memory of seeing Snape’s Dark Mark still vivid in his thoughts, but he felt elated. He wondered vaguely how Draco was doing. He had seen him once the task began, cheering along with his friends as Cedric, Fleur, and Krum all faced their dragons, but Regulus could see him growing paler.

By the time Harry entered the arena, Draco was sheet white, his fingers clasped on the bench beneath him so tightly that Regulus thought it might break. He tried not to openly stare at him, keeping his eyes glued to Harry instead and watching Draco out of his peripheral vision. Still, he noticed the moment it became too much for Draco, the boy jumping up from his seat and nearly sprinting out of the stands. Regulus just barely caught a glimpse of Pansy

Parkinson running after him, chasing him up toward the castle. He hoped that someone told Draco that Harry was fine.

There were a ton of people in the common room waiting for them, but one, in particular, stood out. Ron was standing near the portrait hole, looking very sallow and stressed, staring at Harry like he had seen a ghost.

“Harry,” Ron said. “Whoever put your name in that goblet — I — I reckon they’re trying to do you in!”

Regulus sidestepped Ron, trying to give him and Harry a moment to talk. He just barely caught the words Harry spoke in reply.

“Caught on, have you? Took you long enough.” Harry’s voice was cold.

Despite Harry’s lack of performance during the task, the common room was in the full swing of the party that evening. Fred and George had stolen a ton of food from the kitchens and people were lounging about and talking excitedly about Harry’s brilliant plan not to do anything at all. Regulus watched Harry enjoy the attention from the small second story above the common room, leaning over the railing to see Harry smile as he was welcomed into the fold.

“He’s really something, isn’t he?” James said suddenly. Regulus didn’t even notice him appear next to him. He looked over to see James leaning against the railing as well, a proud smile on his face, his eyes glittering in the firelight.

“Yeah, he is,” Regulus said, looking back at Harry. He was laughing loudly now, Fred had his arm around Harry’s shoulders, both of them listening to George talk as he waved his hands around wildly. Harry’s cheeks were pink with happiness, his green eyes bright. “He’s all you.”

Regulus couldn’t help but remember the way James looked after a Quidditch game when he would be surrounded by his teammates, the moment before the rest of his house made it out onto the pitch. He thrived under their attention, like a plant turning toward the sun. Regulus could never find it in himself to look away.

“No, no, he’s not,” James said quietly. Regulus glanced over at him. James had a look on his face like he was living in a past moment, right at the same time that he was watching his son.

Suddenly, Regulus wasn’t just thinking of James surrounded by his teammates or by his house, he was thinking of the way Lily walked up to James right after his final game at Hogwarts, the way she wrapped her arms around his neck, one hand curling into the hair on the back of his head, drawing up on her toes so she could kiss him on the lips.

Regulus could still recall the way he walked back up to the castle, his legs stiff and barely working, how he focused all of his thoughts on keeping himself from crying. He was the pureblood heir to the Black family, he was not going to cry in public over his ex-boyfriend kissing someone else. He was not going to do it.

Barty found him in bed a few hours later and slowly coaxed him out of the dorm room so that he would eat. Barty was the one that put him back together after that particular meltdown. He wasn't always a good man, but when Regulus needed someone, Barty was there for him.

Regulus wasn't sure why the breakdown happened then, it wasn't even the first time he saw Lily and James together. Perhaps it was that happy, open look that James wore that tore him to shreds. Perhaps it was the realization that no matter how much Regulus loved James, James never belonged to him and never would.

He wondered if James was thinking about that same memory now as he looked at the son he and Lily made.

"No, I guess he's not just you," Regulus said softly. He meant to follow it up with something nice, something humble and accepting, but his chest clenched painfully watching James look so sweetly at Harry. He swallowed around the lump in his throat, and when that didn't help, he decided to cut his losses, turning from James and scampering up to his dorm room.

"Reg?" He heard James say, his voice carrying up the stairs behind him, but Regulus didn't turn around. He wasn't sure what he would see on James's face, but he didn't think he would want to. He grabbed the mirror out of Harry's trunk and dressed in pajamas at record speed, crawling into bed, prepared to have himself a good cry before calling Sirius to ask about their conversation with Dumbledore and going to bed.

The sound of the door to the dorm opening interrupted him though. He looked up quickly, expecting to see James, though of course James never had to open doors and his being able to affect the physical world would be a huge deal. Naturally, it wasn't James. It was Ron.

"Can we talk?" Ron said, looking supremely uncomfortable.

"Of course," Regulus said, though it was a struggle to get the words out. He didn't want to have a conversation with someone else. He had dealt with more than enough that day and just wanted to close himself off, but Ron was a kid and he had that serious look on his face that meant it had been very hard for him to walk up to the dorm to speak to Regulus and, well, Regulus wasn't an asshole.

"I'm sorry," Ron said. At that moment, Regulus is positive that Harry sent Ron up here to apologize. He didn't hear their full conversation, but it didn't sound like Ron was about to apologize to Harry, so the thought that he would be doing it to Regulus exclusively was laughable. Still, Regulus was the adult here.

"What for?" Regulus said. Ron looked a bit out of his depth for a moment, but the hat didn't sort him into Gryffindor for nothing.

"For cutting you off," Ron said.

"It's fine," Regulus said quickly. Ron's mouth was still open like he was going to say something else, perhaps explain himself, but Regulus doesn't need him to. He understood why Ron was upset. He felt left out, ignored, and insecure about his own lack of fame,

especially when compared to Harry's. He let Ron linger in the silence for a moment before continuing. "I'm sorry too, for not telling you who I was."

Ron shrugged just slightly. "Were you ever going to?"

Regulus wanted to say yes immediately, but he forced himself to think about it first. Was he ever going to? Probably, but he couldn't be sure. The only reason he would have considered telling Ron was because Hermione knew, and it felt unfair that only one member of their friend group was left out. If only Harry knew, then he might have never told.

"I think so," he said, as honest an answer as he could give. "But I didn't have any specific plans."

Ron nodded in understanding, but Regulus could see the uncertainty there. He wondered how long it would take to get back to normal.

"How did you know?" Regulus asked. "Who told you?"

"No one told me," Ron said quickly, almost like he was afraid he was about to get someone in trouble. "I don't want to talk about it, but no one told me... who else knows?"

"Luna, Hermione, and Draco," Regulus said quickly, more than used to this question by now.

"Malfoy knows?" Ron replied. "You told Malfoy and not me?"

"He's a Black," Regulus said with a little laugh. "He figured it out all on his own."

Ron left just a bit after that and Regulus was finally free to tuck himself into bed. He didn't feel much like crying anymore, though the empty feeling was still there. He almost wanted to relive all the memories of Lily and James falling in love, kind of like picking at a scab, he wanted to make himself bleed, wanted to hurt himself again and again until he grew numb to it.

Regulus sighed loudly. He didn't know why he felt like this now, it was all too late. There was no way to get James back, he fell in love with someone else and then he died. That was the most closure anyone could ever have from a relationship. But surrounded by so many people that James loved, not to mention James himself occasionally, it was impossible not to miss him. It was easier to not miss James when he felt hopeless, when he didn't see a future for himself, now that he knew he had to live till at least the Dark Lord was dead, it seemed far more daunting to do it alone.

And he was alone. Sure he had friends, and Harry who was more like family, and Sirius, his actual family, but he was... well, he was a bit lonely is all. He couldn't exactly remember a time when he wasn't lonely, but it just felt so much more potent nowadays, like the hollow feeling was a black hole, growing wider and more powerful the more it swallowed.

He sat with that feeling for a long time, wondering vaguely if James would show up again, but he never did. After a few hours had passed, and the rest of the boys were in the dorm, sleeping in bed, he pulled out the mirror, praying that Sirius was still awake.

“Sirius,” he said quietly, though he put up a silencing spell and there was no reason to temper his volume.

“Hey,” Sirius said right away, looking like he was waiting for the call. He was still in the room at the Three Broomsticks.

“Did you talk to Dumbledore?” Regulus asked.

“Yes,” Sirius said. He was smiling, making Regulus realize how rare his smile seemed when he wasn’t talking to Harry. “He recognized the locket. Get this. It used to belong to Salazar Slytherin.”

“What?” Regulus said, excitement surging through him.

“Apparently, Voldemort used to work at Borgin and Burkes when he was fresh out of Hogwarts. That was how he came into contact with the locket.”

“How do you know this?”

“Dumbledore had a memory from this old house elf,” Sirius said, his words coming faster by the second. “Voldemort was working at Borgin and Burkes and would go to this woman’s house to try and convince her to sell her belongings, she ended up showing him the locket and...”

Sirius trailed off, but in a way like he was trying to build excitement. “And?” Regulus asked, falling into his trap regardless of how obvious it was.

“And Helga Hufflepuff’s cup.”

Regulus’s eyes bulged open. “Slytherin and Hufflepuff? He’s collecting Hogwarts artifacts? That’s what he made into Horcruxes?”

“That’s what Dumbledore thinks,” Sirius said with a nod. “He doesn’t know where the cup is yet, but this is more than we had before. Dumbledore was pretty surprised to see the locket.”

“Well, if there is something from Hufflepuff and Slytherin, then shouldn’t there be something from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw?”

“Yeah, I think so. Remus is going to get some old books from our library and start trying to figure it out. We’ll worry about that for now. Any idea what the next task is?” Sirius asked.

“No, Harry didn’t get the egg, remember? That was supposed to contain a clue, so for now, we’re going in blind, but I’m going to try and figure something out,” Regulus replied.

Sirius nodded. “So... Alexander?”

“Good night, Sirius,” he said, feeling embarrassed all over again. He ended the call quickly. He didn’t know why he had said yes to Alexander’s invitation to the Yule Ball. In all reality, he hadn’t been planning to go at all, but with Hermione pestering him and James telling him he should, he just lost his head for a minute.

He felt mortified about it now, but pulling out of the dance would be rude. He would go with Alexander, and then he would never speak to him again.

Chapter End Notes

follow me on tumblr for my exact update schedule: [maladaptivewriting](https://maladaptivewriting.tumblr.com/). You can also follow me on tiktok under the same username.

the scramble.

Chapter Notes

this chapter is a tad short, but the next chapter is the yule ball, so you have that to look forward to. (i'm also uploading an entire week early, so hopefully you're not too disappointed)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The rest of November and most of December flew by in a haze. Regulus was consumed with thoughts about the next task as well as potential Hogwarts artifacts that the Dark Lord could have gotten his hands on. He knew that Lupin was researching it, but he couldn't stop himself from doing the same, searching through books in the library periodically just to see if anything would jump out at him. Nothing had yet, but he wasn't giving up.

Care of Magical Creatures had grown far more dangerous than it already was. The Blast-Ended Skrewts had grown to six feet long and had started killing each other at an exponential rate. Regulus wasn't upset to see them go. Rita was still sniffing around, now specifically requesting an interview with Hagrid, but Regulus chose to ignore her. She was annoying, but for now, she wasn't doing too much harm. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were worried about her talking to Hagrid, but Hagrid just brushed them off.

Divination was becoming tedious. Ron, despite his obvious interest in the subject, was still spending most class periods giggling with Harry as they obviously made fun of Trelawney for her ridiculousness. Trelawney was always waffling between the extremes of encouraging Ron, and even Harry when he would complete his homework by just predicting his own death, and disapproving of their rowdy behavior. Regulus was glad that Harry was laughing at her predictions rather than fretting about them.

Still, despite Harry's seeming indifference to Trelawney's supposed nonsense, Regulus couldn't help but feel annoyed. It was this annoyance that made him linger outside after class ended. Ron and Harry turned to wait with him, clearly wondering what he was up to, but he just waved them off.

"I'll catch up with you," Regulus said. "I need to speak with her about something."

"About what?" Ron asked quickly.

"Come on," Harry said almost at the same time. He gave Regulus a look before pulling on the sleeve of Ron's cloak, dragging him away.

Regulus had to wait for nearly half an hour before Lavender and Parvati left the classroom. They always stayed after to speak with Trelawney, both of them fully enthralled with the woman and her prophecies.

“Hey Reggie,” Lavender said happily when she saw him waiting. Parvati gasped when she heard the name leave Lavender’s mouth. Regulus nearly recoiled but managed to keep himself from actively doing it. Only Sirius had ever called him Reggie. Well, James as well, but only until Regulus told him explicitly not to call him that.

“Lav,” Parvati chastised quietly.

“What?” Lavender asked. “Are you waiting for Trelawney?” she said, turning back to Regulus.

“Yep,” Regulus said with a nod.

“What are you going to ask her?” Parvati asked, her eyes lighting up with excitement. Regulus chewed on his lip, debating how much he should tell them.

“I just wanted to ask about her predictions concerning Harry,” Regulus said, lowering his voice to a whisper.

“Oh, yeah,” Lavender said, nodding seriously. “She’s *so* knowledgeable.”

“Well, I hope not,” Regulus confessed. Lavender frowned, a thoughtful look on her face. Parvati gave him a look that was dangerously close to pity.

“Hey, did you finish that book I gave you?” Lavender asked suddenly.

“Oh,” Regulus said, reaching into his bag to pull out the book. “I finished it last week, thanks for letting me borrow it.” Regulus had actually felt a bit scandalized by the book once he really got into it, he didn’t know that anyone read or wrote books like that, and he was even more surprised that someone Lavender’s age would read them.

“Here, you can read this one next,” Lavender said, already shoving another paperback novel into his hands. Parvati snickered.

“Lavender, that one’s terrible,” Parvati said, holding a hand over her mouth as she laughed.

“Please, it’s not that bad,” Lavender said, waving her hand dismissively.

“I should go,” Regulus said, gesturing toward the trap door after he quickly shoved the novel into his bag. He didn’t even look at it first, sure that he didn’t want to risk someone seeing him holding it.

“Right, see you later, Reggie,” Lavender said, wiggling her fingers as she and Parvati flounced off down the stairs. Regulus climbed up to the classroom, the pressure in his head immediately swelling when the strong incense smell flooded his nose. He cast a quick spell to dispense it, the scent was always too much for him. He didn’t know how Trelawney could stand it.

The classroom was still disorganized, though Trelawney was flittering around by one of the tables like she was trying to clean up. Regulus watched her for a moment, staying silent. He didn’t dislike her exactly, but he wasn’t sure that she was really a competent professor.

“OH!” Trelawney said, half stumbling down the stairs when she caught sight of Regulus. *Didn't you see me coming?* Regulus kept himself from saying. “What can I do for you, dear?”

“I need to ask you about your predictions about Harry's life,” Regulus said, deciding to cut right to the point. “How much are you seeing? What do you actually know?”

Trelawney gave him a long look but didn't answer right away. “You are a surprising student, Regulus,” she mumbled finally.

“If something is going to happen to him, then I need to know about it,” Regulus said quickly, barreling over her statement. “And if not, then you need to stop bringing it up at every given moment. He has enough to worry about without your prattling on all the time.” His voice was sharp broken glass, flying through the room like weapons.

Trelawney ambled closer to him, reaching out a hand and gently touching Regulus's cheek. Regulus worked to not pull away, not wanting to flinch in front of her. “It will work out for you,” she said, her voice nearly a whisper. “But there will be so much pain before that happens, pain you are not going to understand.”

“You could say that about anyone,” Regulus replied, but his voice was fainter than it had been a moment before.

“Don't believe everything he says to you,” Trelawney said. “He doesn't mean it.”

Regulus shook his head, dislodging her hand.

“And Harry?” Regulus said, speaking just as quietly. She didn't answer him, only turning and walking back up to one of the tables to continue cleaning. He ended up leaving the classroom feeling discontented and shaken. He should have known it would be useless. Or mostly useless, the one triumph was that she stopped bringing up Harry's death by the next week of classes.

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In Transfiguration later that week, Professor McGonagall gave them a reminder about the Yule Ball. It was only a few weeks from Christmas, when the Yule Ball would take place, but it was clear that nearly half the students had forgotten about the ball.

“The Yule Ball is approaching,” she said sternly. It was nearly the end of class and everyone seemed hasty to leave. “It is a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with our foreign guests. Now, the ball will be open only to fourth years and above — although you may invite a younger student if you wish,” she said.

Regulus tuned her out after that. He watched vaguely as Lavender and Parvati giggled excitedly through the entire announcement, both of them glancing back at Harry as McGonagall spoke. Harry and Ron both looked bored, but Hermione was watching McGonagall with rapt attention, a light dusting of pink across her nose and cheeks.

“Potter — a word, if you please,” McGonagall said just as they were standing to leave. Regulus hovered near the exit of class to wait for Harry to catch up. He was almost certain that he knew what she was going to say.

He lingered outside the classroom, shivering slightly. The Transfiguration Courtyard was built in such a way that it almost always caused a wind tunnel to form near the classrooms. He could have easily cast a warming charm on himself, but he oddly loved the cold chill. It made him feel real.

Harry left the classroom only a few minutes later looking both worried and sullen.

“What did McGonagall want?” Regulus asked.

“I have to have a *dance partner*,” Harry said, throwing his hands up in exasperation, “for the Yule Ball.” Regulus valiantly held himself back from laughing, biting roughly on his lower lip to keep himself under control.

“Yes,” Regulus agreed with a little nod.

“You knew?” Harry asked, his eyes wide in shock. Regulus couldn’t stop himself any longer, letting out a laugh.

“Of course,” Regulus said. “Everyone’s been talking about the Yule Ball for weeks, Harry.”

“Yes, well, I didn’t *realize* that I would be forced to dance in front of the entire school,” Harry said. He looked like he was a second away from stomping his foot in frustration. “I don’t even know how to dance!”

“It’s not that hard,” Regulus said. “I can teach you, but you will need to get a date.”

“Oh, no,” Harry breathed. Regulus laughed again and Harry shot him a betrayed look.

The next week was fraught with tension as Ron and Harry had many discussions about how they would manage to get dates for the Yule Ball. The boys seemed fully out of their depth faced with the task of speaking to a girl. Regulus was being a bit cruel with the way he laughed at them every time they expressed worry over the prospect of approaching one of the girls, but he couldn’t help it.

“Why doesn’t he just walk up and ask someone?” James said to him one afternoon. Regulus was out on the grounds, walking near the lake. Alexander had asked to meet him but had yet to show.

“He’s intimidated,” Regulus said with a little laugh.

“The worst they can say is no,” James said, shaking his head. “I mean, really, it’s not that hard.”

“Not everyone is quite so resilient in the face of repeated rejections,” Regulus replied. James laughed good-naturedly.

“Won’t you take pity on him,” James implored.

“What do you want me to do? Set him up like a playdate. I know I’m a pureblood, but I hardly think you want me organizing an arranged marriage for him.”

James laughed again, though he abruptly cut himself off, his lips twisting unhappily, when Alexander came jogging up to Regulus. His blue school robes fluttered behind him elegantly as he moved, and Regulus vaguely wondered if he charmed them to do that.

“Regulus,” he greeted with a bright smile.

“Hello, Alexander,” Regulus greeted politely. James didn’t leave like he usually did, only stood to his side with his arms crossed. Regulus had to work not to glance over at him.

“I wanted to ask what you are wearing to the Ball,” Alexander said before launching into an explanation of his expected attire, the one his school suggested, as well as the *four* extra outfits he had purchased for the occasion. Regulus hadn’t given it much thought, though he realized now that he should probably ask Kreacher to bring him some options. He knew some of his old dress robes could be modified to fit him.

“What’s got you so despondent?” Regulus asked James once Alexander had gone. James was still frowning, but when Regulus spoke to him, his face cleared.

“Nothing, nothing,” James said. “He seems lovely.”

Regulus guffawed. “You’re the one who told me to say yes to him,” Regulus said.

“I know that,” James said, placing his hands on his hips and looking out toward the lake. Regulus shook his head.

“You’re ridiculous.”

That night, when they were in the common room, Fred and George came by to seemingly add another level of pressure on Ron and Harry.

“So... you lot got dates for the ball yet?” Fred said

“Nope,” Ron said.

“Well, you’d better hurry up, mate or all the good ones will be gone,” Fred said.

Ron ended up saying some ridiculous and mean things about some of the girls in their year, and Hermione went to bed early, clearly mad at him. Harry just looked a little vexed, though there was a determination behind his eyes. Regulus decided that he would give them one more day before he helped them out.

He found Harry wandering back to Gryffindor Tower the following night in a daze.

“Hey, you all right?” Regulus said, elbowing him lightly. Harry looked up like he didn’t even realize Regulus had approached him.

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” Harry said, but he was frowning. Regulus waited but when Harry didn’t continue he sighed.

“What happened?”

“I asked Cho to the dance,” Harry said.

“Oh,” Regulus replied, a bit surprised. Mostly he was glad that Harry hadn’t asked Cedric. He had forgotten about Harry’s crush on the Ravenclaw seeker. Harry really had a type, Regulus thought, his mind wandering unwillingly to a certain blonde boy. “Well, that’s good. What did she say?”

“She’s already going with Cedric.” *Thank Salazar*, Regulus thought.

“Tough luck,” Regulus said. “You know, you could ask Luna. She’s too young to go on her own since she’s in third year. You two could go as friends.”

“Yeah,” Harry said faintly. “Yeah, I think I will. Thanks.” He turned immediately to find her. Regulus shook his head in quiet exasperation. He walked into the common room to find Ron sitting in a distant corner looking ashen. Ginny was sitting next to him, talking to him in a low and soothing voice.

“What’s up?” Regulus said, walking over to them.

“Why did I do it? I didn’t — I don’t know what made me do it!” Ron’s voice was high-pitched and squeaky.

“What did you do?” Regulus said, alarmed.

“He just asked Fleur Delacour to the ball,” Ginny said, she was making a courageous effort to keep from smiling.

“You did what?” Regulus said, his eyebrows raising even farther up his forehead.

“I don’t know what made me do it!” Ron said, explaining that he saw her talking to Cedric and just walked up to ask her. “She looked at me like I was a sea slug or something. Didn’t even answer.”

“Oof,” Regulus said, cringing slightly. “Well, good on you for trying.” Ron did not look like a man who felt good for trying, he looked like he was contemplating drowning himself in the Black Lake.

“Why weren’t you guys at dinner?” Hermione asked a few moments later as she climbed through the portrait hole.

“Hermione,” Ron said faintly. “Neville’s right — you *are* a girl...”

“Oh, no,” Regulus said quietly. Ginny covered her face with her hands.

“Well spotted,” Hermione said burningly. Regulus couldn’t watch the interaction, it was like witnessing a train crash. Regulus was not surprised that Hermione turned Ron down, but he was surprised to learn that she already had a date. He wondered why she didn’t tell anyone.

Regulus tuned out the conversation when he noticed Parvati and Lavender coming into the common room.

“Hey,” Regulus called, striding over toward them.

“Reggie!” Parvati greeted. *Great*, Regulus thought, but he didn’t comment.

“Do you both have dates for the Yule Ball?”

“Parvati doesn’t,” Lavender said, a triumphant smile on her face. Parvati shot her a momentarily betrayed look, but covered it quickly with a smile. “I thought you were going with Alexander.”

“I am,” Regulus replied quickly. “I was wondering if you would be willing to go with Ron.” Parvati leaned around him to look at Ron, pursing her lips to the side, before sighing.

“Yes, fine,” Parvati agreed. Regulus sighed.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I don’t think I can listen to him complain any longer about trying to find a date.” Parvati and Lavender giggled before leaving to go up to their common room, waving at Regulus as they went.

“Are you friends with them?” Ginny asked when he walked back over, she sounded appalled.

“Suppose so,” Regulus said. “Ron, you’re going to the Ball with Parvati.” Ron’s mouth opened in shock.

“I am?” Ron breathed.

“You’re welcome,” Regulus said, shaking his head.

“What about Harry?” Ron asked just as Harry came striding into the common room.

“She said yes,” Harry said cheerfully. “This whole thing is more trouble than it’s worth, I’m telling you.”

“Who said yes?” Ginny asked quickly, her eyes bright with intrigue. Regulus couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw a little jealousy there.

“Luna,” Harry said.

“You asked Luna?” Ron said, sounding shocked.

“We’re going as friends,” Harry explained. Ron nodded, and Ginny looked momentarily relieved.

That night when they were relaxing in their dorm room, Regulus decided that it was finally time for him to teach Harry how to dance.

“Do I have to learn?” Harry whined.

“I guess not,” Regulus replied with false nonchalance. “You’re more than welcome to make a fool out of yourself instead.”

“Ugh,” Harry groaned but stood quickly.

“You’re teaching him how to dance?” Neville asked suddenly, keen interest behind his eyes.

“Not you too,” Ron grumbled.

“Yes,” Regulus said. “It’s really not that difficult. You just need to learn a few steps, and then you’ll be fine. I highly doubt anyone is expecting you to show off.”

“Says you,” Harry muttered. Neville didn’t look sure and ended up standing as well.

Regulus hadn’t been expecting it, he had just planned to give Harry a short lesson based on his own knowledge. Regulus, like most children in the Sacred Twenty-Eight, was forced to take many dance lessons as a child. He definitely wasn’t going to force Harry to learn all that he had, but he wanted to give him at least a fighting chance.

Instead, he spent nearly two hours teaching all the fourth-year Gryffindor boys how to Waltz. At first, it was just Harry and Neville, but eventually, Ron started feeling left out and joined them. Only half an hour in, Seamus and Dean came back to the dorm and joined as well.

James appeared only a few minutes after Regulus started talking and spent the entire night spread out on Regulus’s unused bed, his arms folded behind his head, a gentle smile on his lips. It turned out to be a surprisingly fun evening, and Regulus went to bed confident that Harry and the other boys would be well prepared.

Chapter End Notes

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the yule ball.

“This lace looks so girly,” Ron groaned unhappily. They were all getting dressed for the Yule Ball. Or at least, the other Gryffindor boys were. Regulus was already dressed and had been for nearly half an hour.

At the last minute, he had requested that Kreacher bring him some of his old dress robes so that he could choose a set to wear. He ended up settling for a pair of simple black ones that he had only worn once around this same age. He was pretty sure it was for a family Christmas event, but he had so many sets of dress robes that he couldn't be sure. Regardless, they still fit just fine and that was all that mattered.

“It's not that bad,” Harry responded, but he was grimacing as he said it. Harry and Ron were both wearing dress robes that Molly Weasley had purchased for them, though Harry's were more modern. Plus the green color that Harry wore was much more flattering than the color of Ron's. Regulus realized far too late that he should have purchased new dress robes for them earlier, so they weren't forced to wear the secondhand ones. He had offered a spare pair of his own sets, but both of them had refused.

“I'm going to cut off the lace,” Ron said, reaching for his wand.

“Let me,” Regulus said, jumping in quickly. He doubted Ron had the subtly needed for small clothing transfiguration.

Regulus made quick work of the lace, removing the fabric from the ruff and cuff. He also noticed an odd scent coming from the old clothing and cast a quick freshening charm on it. He stepped back to look Ron over, it was better without the lace, but it still looked odd. The color definitely wasn't helping. Regulus had never been the best at charms for clothing, it wasn't something he was allowed to practice growing up, often seen as beneath someone from his family, but he knew one spell that always worked.

“There,” Regulus said, satisfied, tucking away his wand.

“Oh, perfect, this is much better,” Ron said cheerfully. The old garment was now completely black, the fabric slightly transfigured to give it a silk appearance. It wouldn't last forever, but Regulus was certain it would at least last until tomorrow morning. Then Ron could throw out the robes and never think about them ever again.

“I still can't work out how you got the best-looking girl in the year,” Dean said sulkily to Ron. Regulus didn't even realize Dean felt that way about Parvati. He wondered if he should tell her.

“Animal magnetism,” Ron replied, sounding equally sulky. Regulus shook his head.

“Make sure you're nice to Parvati,” Regulus said sternly. “She was nice to agree to go with you.” Ron nodded slightly.

“I should probably go meet Luna,” Harry said.

“I’ll come with you,” Regulus replied. “I’m meeting Alexander downstairs.” Ron waved them off as they left, still looking at himself in the mirror.

They ran into Luna on their way downstairs. She was dressed in a cherry red dress that was covered in real flowers, all of them various shades of red, blue, and purple. She had charmed them to move around as well and a few were fluttering around her head like butterflies.

“Hey, Luna,” Harry greeted.

“You look lovely, Luna,” Regulus said.

“Thank you, Regulus,” she said mildly. “You both look nice as well. That green really brings out your eyes, Harry.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, blushing slightly.

They walked down together. Alexander was waiting at the foot of the stairs dressed in a very expensive set of gray robes. They were silky and shimmered in the firelight.

“Good evening,” he greeted, a wide smile gracing his face. His French accent sounded stronger than usual. Regulus wondered if he would prefer to speak in French. His was a little rusty, but he thought he might be able to get by if Alexander asked.

Alexander grabbed Regulus’s hand, placing a gentle kiss on the back of it before squeezing his fingers gently.

Regulus smiled. “You look nice,” he said. Alexander flashed a bright grin at him.

“Thank you,” Alexander said emphatically. “I chose this color to match your eyes.

“What a thoughtful thing to do,” Luna said. Alexander seemed to do a double take looking at Luna, his eyes glancing up to watch the moving flowers.

“I like your... dress,” he said with odd formality.

“I made it myself,” Luna replied. Alexander made a face like that point was glaringly obvious.

The doors were still closed to the Great Hall when a group of Slytherins came up the steps from the dungeon. Draco was leading the pack, wearing extravagant black dress robes that had a very high collar. Pansy had her arm curled around Draco’s, her pink frilly dress a stark difference from Draco’s look. Regulus looked away, but noticed Harry’s eyes lingering a second too long on Draco, before he glanced back at the doors.

“Champions over here, please!” McGonagall called.

“See you,” Harry said quietly, walking over to McGonagall with Luna in tow. Regulus noticed Fleur Delacour and a Ravenclaw student he didn’t know the name of, as well as

Cedric and Cho. Harry was very purposefully not looking at them. Regulus saw Krum as well, and it took a long minute for him to recognize the girl with him.

It was Hermione. She was dressed in a periwinkle dress and her usually curly hair had been slicked down into a twisted knot on the back of her head. She was smiling, though she looked nervous.

“Shall we?” Alexander said, interrupting Regulus’s staring.

“Of course,” Regulus said politely, hooking his arm around Alexander’s. The doors had finally opened to the Great Hall, and Regulus noticed the champions and their dates standing off the side waiting for everyone else to enter. Alexander led him to one of the tables. The Great Hall was lavishly decorated with mistletoe and ivy on every available surface. The tables were lantern-lit and smaller than usual.

“Did you see Hermione?” Parvati said suddenly, she came sprinting over to their table, which was still empty except for the two of them. Ron was a few paces behind her looking surly.

“Yes, did you know she was going with Krum?” Regulus replied curiously.

“No idea,” Parvati said, shaking her head vigorously. Ron and Parvati sat down with them, but Ron didn’t speak. Parvati shot him a look before glancing back at Regulus like she was asking what she should do. Regulus shook his head unhappily.

Lavender and Seamus joined them a moment after Parvati and Ron sat down. Dean arrived with a Hufflepuff student a year above them. Neville and Ginny joined them next and Ron, who already looked to be in a terrible mood, seemed flabbergasted to see them together. Neville was clearly embarrassed, avoiding Ron’s gaze, but he pulled the chair out for Ginny politely, and when he caught Regulus’s eye, Regulus made sure to smile encouragingly at him. The last couple to join them were both from Beauxbatons, obviously Alexander’s friends given the way they beelined over to him.

Alexander and Regulus talked idly as the rest of the tables filled up. They really hadn’t spent much time together so it was nice to just chat as they waited. Alexander was friendly and easygoing, asking Regulus questions about which classes he was in and what subjects he liked the most.

“My favorite is... I think you call it Charms?” Alexander said. Regulus nodded. “Yes, Charms. My father said that all my magical outbursts as a child were Charms-related.”

“Oh, like what?” Regulus asked.

Alexander chuckled, his eyes far away, lost in a memory. “When I was very little, I would apparently summon anything in the house that I wanted by just scrunching up my nose.” He brushed his long fingers along the bridge of his nose as he spoke. “It started to become such an issue that my parents had to begin gluing down every object they could.”

Regulus laughed. “That’s quite impressive.”

“What was your first magical outburst?” Alexander asked, turning back to look at Regulus. His eyes were bright with interest.

“Well,” Regulus said, searching for some answer to give. It wasn’t the kind of thing that his family shared. Most stories of magical outbursts were made up, so they could be passed between family members, used for the sole purpose of bragging about their “magically gifted child.”

“I bet you had a lot,” Alexander interrupted Regulus’s musing. “You seem magically powerful.”

Regulus’s cheeks darkened slightly. “I don’t know that it was my first exactly, but it’s one of the first I can remember. I can’t recall why exactly, but I somehow enchanted all of my dirty clothes so that they would start dancing around my bedroom.”

Alexander laughed loudly, and Regulus gave him a half smile.

“Did you have music playing?” Alexander asked.

Regulus shook his head. “No, they were just dancing to their own rhythm,” Regulus replied with a chuckle.

He tried to ignore the way his chest clenched at the memory. Sirius had certainly found it hilarious, he can still remember his peels of laughter echoing off the walls. It was one of his first memories. His mother had not been as entertained. She barged into the room and demanded to know who was responsible. Regulus was too young back then to understand what was going on, but Sirius immediately claimed responsibility. His mother had punished Sirius so badly that he hadn’t been able to walk for two days.

“Here come the champions!” Parvati squealed. Regulus was glad for the distraction.

He watched the four champions enter with a quiet smile on his face. Harry looked thoroughly overwhelmed and like he was concentrating far too hard on walking normally, as if he was afraid he might trip over his feet if his focus slipped for even a second. Luna was next to him looking distracted and only mildly interested in what was going on.

They walked up to the head table where Dumbledore, Karkaroff, and Maxime were all seated. Barty’s father wasn’t there, but Regulus noticed Percy Weasley in his spot. When the four champions arrived, Percy pulled out the seat next to him, giving Harry a very smug look. Harry went to take the seat next to him, and Regulus tried to keep an eye on them, but they were all quickly distracted by the appearance of menus.

“Wow, we’ve never gotten menus before,” Seamus said, his voice filled with awe. “How do we order?”

“You just say the item out loud,” Regulus explained. These types of menus were common at Black family functions. They were excessively expensive, at least they used to be, and mostly there to keep wizards from having to interact with house elves.

“Ooh!” Seamus said loudly, a thoughtful look on his face. “Roasted chicken!” he yelled. Immediately his empty plate was filled with chicken, a broad, hungry grin stretching across his face. Alexander laughed lightly before placing his own order.

The rest of dinner was spent with them all talking together, though Ron was suspiciously silent throughout the meal. He kept shooting hurt and betrayed looks over at Hermione. Regulus could feel a storm brewing and all he knew was that he didn’t want to be in the room when it came to pass.

After the food had all been eaten, Dumbledore asked all of the guests to stand up. When they did, the tables were cleared with a quick wave of his wand. He quickly conjured a stage with several instruments, the Weird Sisters gliding onto the platform a moment later. Regulus watched as Luna gripped Harry by the hand and practically dragged him out to the center of the room with the other champions and their dates. Harry looked like he was seconds away from throwing up.

The dancing wasn’t bad and Harry looked presentable, if a little awkward, as he and Luna twirled around. Others joined them fairly quickly, Neville and Ginny the first two to go, and by then, no one noticed that Harry had only learned to dance a few days before.

“Would you like to dance?” Alexander asked, leaning down to whisper in Regulus’s ear. Regulus repressed a shiver while nodding politely. Alexander was taller than Regulus, but not by so much that it was awkward to dance with him. He was a good dancer, clearly, he had taken lessons just as Regulus had, and Regulus fell into step with him easily.

They were moving closer to the wall where a line of chairs had appeared when Regulus noticed Harry walk off the dance floor toward where Ron was brooding next to Parvati. He was just close enough to catch a piece of their conversation.

“How’s it going?” Harry asked Ron. Ron didn’t answer. Harry grabbed a butterbeer and sat down in the chair next to him.

“Parvati, would you like to dance?” Luna asked, her feet still moving like she was in the middle of a dance, though she stayed in place.

“You don’t mind, do you, Ron?” she asked. Ron didn’t even look at her. “Oh, never mind,” she snapped, jumping to her feet and grabbing Luna by the hand, both of them joining the rest of the dancing students.

Regulus rolled his eyes and pulled Alexander away, so he wasn’t forced to watch the two boys sulk, immediately throwing himself back into the music, and pushing the thought of teenage angst from his thoughts.

He surprised himself by having a lot of fun. He really hadn’t expected it. The Weird Sisters played a wide array of music, and they danced along to each one. Several times Alexander’s friends came over to join them, trading off partners in between songs only for Alexander and Regulus to come back together by the end.

“It’s hot in here, do you want to step outside?” Alexander shouted over the music. Regulus wondered if he was just being polite, he was pretty sure that he was red-faced from exertions, his hair sticking to his skin from the sweat. He must have looked ridiculous. He glanced over to where Ron and Harry still sat, and noticed Hermione over there with them, Ron’s face growing into an even worse scowl.

“Yes, definitely,” Regulus shouted back. Alexander linked his fingers in-between Regulus’s and led him out of the Great Hall.

The front doors in the entrance hall were open allowing the cold December air to flow freely into the area, cooling Regulus off immediately. Outside there were fluttering fairy lights in the rose garden decorating the greenery that lined each of the winding paths. There were several couples sitting on the carved benches nearby. Regulus led them to one of the tucked-away alcoves near the front doors, breathing in the chilly air as he leaned against the stone.

“Are you having fun?” Alexander asked, his smile soft.

“I am,” Regulus said.

“I am not sure if I should sound offended by how surprised you sound,” Alexander said, not unkindly.

Regulus let out a startled laugh, and Alexander’s smile widened in response. “I’m sorry, I guess I wasn’t expecting to enjoy myself.”

“Why not?”

Regulus gave him a long look. “I don’t know,” he said softly. Alexander's smile didn’t falter, but there was something in his eyes that Regulus didn’t recognize.

Regulus saw it coming, but he didn’t stop it. He saw the way Alexander’s eyes glanced down, the way his smile softened, the way he turned and leaned down. Regulus watched it all with an out-of-body feeling. His heartbeat galloped in his chest, but he couldn’t force himself to move.

Alexander pressed his lips against Regulus’s, his hand coming up to gently cup Regulus’s cheek. His lips were warm and soft and Regulus sighed immediately, Alexander taking the moment as permission to deepen the kiss. He couldn’t remember the last time he was kissed. Alexander’s tongue drifted along the seam of his lips like water gliding along the shore.

It was nice. This was nice. It was fine. Regulus couldn’t ever remember thinking this much while being kissed. His thoughts felt so loud, echoing through his head, ricocheting violently. Alexander was pulling away before he could get them under control. His soft smile was a little sad now.

“It is okay,” he said quietly. He kissed Regulus one last time, just a gentle touch. Regulus knew it was a goodbye. A second later he was gone, walking back into the Great Hall like nothing had happened, Regulus left alone in the cold.

He wasn't upset by it, though admittedly it wasn't the end Regulus would have predicted. He felt a bit bad for Alexander. He hadn't wanted to hurt him, though he knew it wouldn't ever go past this one dance. He didn't know where everyone else was, and he had no interest in re-entering the Great Hall dateless, so he decided to head to Gryffindor Tower.

He wandered back slowly, walking as if in a daze. He felt dehydrated and tired. It wasn't until he was back in the empty dorm room that he acknowledged the empty feeling in his chest, that hollow loneliness only growing as the minutes ticked by.

"I've never seen you dance like that," James said. Regulus jumped slightly, he hadn't noticed him standing by Regulus's bed, leaning up against the wall casually.

"Well, there was never a Triwizard Tournament while we were in school together," Regulus said. He could hear the smile in his voice, James's mere presence soothing the ache inside him like a cooling balm.

"Would you have gone with me to the Yule Ball had we had one?" James asked. Regulus gave him a hard look, sensing that he was being mocked, but James's face was tender.

"Of course," he said softly. They both knew it was a lie. James would have had to tell Sirius about them for that to happen. Lily would have had to say no first. Regulus would have had to admit to everyone in the school that he was dating a blood traitor.

"I'm jealous that he got to dance with you, and I didn't," James said bluntly.

"I never knew you were so possessive," Regulus said jokingly. *Not over me*, he added in his head. James frowned slightly, but it cleared quickly.

"It's not something I like to share," James said softly, looking mildly ashamed. Regulus chuckled, shaking his head fondly.

"Come here," he commanded, stretching out an open hand toward James.

James looked at him questioningly for a second before inching forward, his face deeply unsure. Regulus was worried for a moment that he might be flat-out rejected, but James gripped his hand tightly only a second later. As usual, he couldn't really feel him, there was no warmth, but there was a light pressure, it was enough for him to know James was there.

Regulus pulled him in and curled his arms around James's neck, resting his chin against his shoulder. James grabbed his waist lightly, his fingers resting lightly against his lower back. There was no music, but Regulus didn't need any. They moved in slow circles intertwined with each other.

"I miss you," Regulus whispered. He instantly regretted saying the words. He was just so lonely, he had let himself get carried away. He pulled away from James immediately, not brave enough to look at his face. "I'm tired. I think I need to get some sleep."

"Okay," James replied quietly. Regulus grabbed his pajamas out of his trunk and nearly ran to the bathroom to get undressed.

By the time he was in bed only a few minutes later, James was gone. He curled up tightly into a ball behind his closed curtains, the aching hole inside him growing wider and wider by the second before a restless sleep finally claimed him.

the egg.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Regulus woke up on Boxing Day it was to find Harry already up and watching him. It was early in the morning, the sun just barely over the horizon, but Harry looked like he'd been up for hours. Regulus wondered if he had slept at all. He was curled up by the window, but his eyes were on Regulus.

"Morning," Regulus said groggily.

"Hey," Harry said. "Good night? I didn't see you leave." Regulus pushed himself up so that he was sitting, his legs thrown over the side of the bed. His head ached like he had been up drinking, he guessed it was from the dehydration.

"It was fine," Regulus said with a shrug. "I came back early."

Harry grimaced slightly. "Yeah, I saw Alexander snogging one of the Beauxbatons girls."

"Oh," Regulus said, more for a lack of anything else to add. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel, to be honest. "Glad he recovered so quickly."

"Recovered from what?" Harry asked curiously, tilting his head to the side slightly.

Regulus shook his head. "Why are you up so early?" He noticed the way Harry's fingers were tapping incessantly against his knees like he had an excess of energy that he didn't know what to do with.

"Cedric gave me his egg," Harry said quickly.

"Sorry?" Regulus said confusedly, squinting at Harry.

"Said I should take a bath with it." The words tumbled out of his mouth.

"Cedric said you should take a bath with him?" Regulus asked, alarmed. Harry's face turned so red that he worried he might blow up at any second.

"No," Harry muttered. "He said I should take the egg to the Prefects' bathroom, he gave me the password."

"He said you should take the egg to the bath?" Regulus repeated.

"Yes," Harry said frustratedly. "Stop repeating me." Regulus shook his head again, trying to clear it.

"Right, sorry, why did he give you his egg?" He felt like he was stumbling through this conversation.

“He said it was repayment for helping him with the dragon, giving him a heads up, you know? He said I could borrow it for a few days.”

“Where is the egg now?”

Harry responded by looking pointedly at his bed where the egg was sitting directly on his pillow.

“Have you taken it to the Prefects’ bathroom yet?”

“No,” Harry said. “I figured I would tell you first.”

“Okay,” Regulus said nodding.

“I opened it last night, down in the common room, and it made an awful screeching noise. I thought my ears were going to start bleeding,” Harry said with a tiny laugh. Regulus blinked at him for a second.

“I need some tea, then I’ll figure it out.” He felt like his head was too heavy for his body.

“I can help,” Harry said instantly, jolting forward like he was going to stand but changed his mind at the last second.

“It’s fine,” Regulus said haphazardly, climbing out of bed and stretching. He was sore for some reason, probably from all the dancing.

“No,” Harry repeated, more firmly this time. “I want to help. I know you said we aren’t going to do anything, but I want to at least be prepared.”

Regulus gave him a measured look. “Okay,” he said slowly, dragging out the word. “We’ll go after breakfast.”

Harry nodded, standing up and heading to his trunk.

“Did you sleep at all?” Regulus asked as they descended the stairs to the common room. It was a chilly morning, and Regulus shivered slightly.

“A little,” Harry responded distractedly.

“What time did you get back?” Regulus asked, looking at him from the corner of his eye.

Harry shrugged. “Not that late,” he said. “But I couldn’t sleep.” Regulus nodded.

They walked down to breakfast together through a completely empty castle. Everyone must have been sleeping late because of the Yule Ball the night before. The corridors were eerily silent. Harry had brought his bag along with him, tucking the egg into it. No doubt someone would wonder where he got it from if they saw it. The bag would probably also look suspicious to anyone who saw it, but it would have to do for now.

“What happened with Ron and Hermione?” Regulus asked, already regretting the question. He knew he would hear about it either way, so he figured hearing it from Harry first would be better.

Harry immediately rolled his eyes. “Ron was so *mad* at Hermione for going to the Yule Ball with Krum. First, he was mad 'cause she didn't tell us, which is fine, I don't care, but I get it,” Harry said, already slipping into his ranting voice. “Then he was all ‘*she's fraternizing with the enemy*.’ It was so embarrassing.” Harry lowered his voice while imitating Ron, and Regulus chuckled quietly.

“He always was the jealous sort,” Regulus said.

“That's why he was so mad? Cause he wanted to go to the Ball with Hermione?”

“Yeah, probably,” Regulus answered with another little laugh. “I'll have to apologize to Parvati.”

“Er, yeah,” Harry said awkwardly. “I don't think she had a very good time.” Harry shook his head exasperated as they walked into the Great Hall. It was almost completely empty. Only Dumbledore was there, eating slowly while he read the *Prophet*.

“Morning Professor,” Harry said when Dumbledore looked up at them. Despite the fact that the castle was full of students, unlike most winter breaks, there was only one long table in the Great Hall. Harry and Regulus sat only a few seats away from Dumbledore.

“Early start today, boys?” Dumbledore asked cheerfully. Harry nodded but didn't respond. “Did you enjoy yourself last night?”

“Of course,” Regulus said politely, but Dumbledore was giving him a look that clearly meant he didn't believe him.

“Better than some,” Harry muttered, tucking into breakfast with a fierce viciousness.

“Ah, yes,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. “The cruel sting of young love. Miss Lovegood seemed to enjoy herself. I noticed she was one of the last to leave.”

Regulus smiled fondly. He should have spent more time with her last name, the guilt from leaving so soon was starting to bother him.

“Luna could have fun doing just about anything,” Harry said.

“That's a skill in and of itself, is it not?” Dumbledore replied. Harry seemed to think about it as if the idea had never occurred to him but finally nodded in agreement.

“Do you know what's wrong with Mr. Crouch? Percy said he was sick,” Harry said after a few long moments of silence. He was looking at Dumbledore with that keen gaze he got when he was trying to puzzle something out.

“I can't say I do,” Dumbledore answered, a slight furrow to his eyebrows causing the deep line between them to sink even further into his wrinkled skin.

“Percy told you this last night?” Regulus asked, remembering Percy’s smug face as he beckoned Harry over.

Harry nodded once. “Yes, he said that Mr. Crouch hasn’t been the same since the World Cup.”

“Hm,” Dumbledore hummed quietly. “It has been a difficult year for him, I’m afraid.”

“Has it?” Regulus asked.

“Losing his house elf so publicly, I cannot imagine it was easy,” Dumbledore responded evenly. Regulus felt like he was missing something, but he didn’t know if Dumbledore knew either. It was like they were both walking around blind, both with pieces of the puzzle, but not nearly enough.

“He shouldn’t have dismissed her like that,” Regulus said softly, remembering what Harry told him about how Winky was freed at the World Cup.

“I thought you supported S.P.E.W.,” Harry said, his voice lightly sarcastic.

“S.P.E.W.?” Dumbledore asked.

“The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare,” Regulus supplied. “Hermione created it.”

“She wants to free all the house elves,” Harry added offhandedly.

“A noble cause,” Dumbledore said, bringing his fingers together in front of him, his fingertips touching lightly.

“All the house elves are afraid of her now,” Harry said. “Worried she might free them against their will.”

“How do you know that?” Dumbledore asked, a twinkle in his eye indicating that he already knew. Harry looked at him nervously before stuffing his mouth with a piece of toast. “And you support S.P.E.W.?” He aimed the question at Regulus.

“I wear the badges,” Regulus said simply. Dumbledore and Harry kept watching him like they expected more of an explanation. Regulus sighed quietly before double-checking that they were still alone. “I’m not going to turn it down when she offers. She’s fifteen.” Harry didn’t seem to understand, but Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully.

“Would you ever free Kreacher?” Harry asked. Regulus worked not to cringe.

“I don’t think so,” Regulus said. “Kreacher is so old, and he’s very loyal to my family. He was especially attached to my mother. I think the shock would kill him if I tried to free him.”

“Is that why you said Mr. Crouch shouldn’t have dismissed Winky?”

“It’s very shameful for elves to be freed like that. Most of them are not like Dobby.”

“Dobby is certainly an anomaly,” Dumbledore added.

“If Winky didn’t have Hogwarts as an option, I’m not sure what she could have done,” Regulus said, thinking of the secondhand story he heard from Hermione about their visit to the kitchens. Winky sounded so desolate.

“That’s true,” Dumbledore said, looking at Harry. “Perhaps Miss Granger should think about the options for all the house elves she plans to free.”

“Do you think she’s wrong for trying to free them?” Harry asked inquisitively.

“Wouldn’t you want to be free?” Dumbledore replied.

“Yes,” Harry answered automatically. “Imagine if you ended up with the Malfoy family or something. Sounds horrible.”

Regulus didn’t reply, but the ideas weighed on him through the rest of breakfast. No one else joined them, still far too early for most of the castle to be awake after the festivities the night before. Dumbledore left only a bit after they finished talking, ambling out of the Great Hall while he hummed to himself.

“Do you ever get the feeling that Dumbledore can hear your thoughts?” Harry said.

“He probably can,” Regulus answered automatically, interrupted immediately by a yawn. It was too early to be having these kinds of conversations.

“What?” Harry shouted, alarmed.

“Yeah, he’s a powerful wizard, and he’s really old. I’m sure he has some level of control over his Legilimency.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked, his eyes still wide with shock.

“It’s a type of magic that allows someone to search another person's mind. The Dark — You-Know-Who was proficient at it. Some people just have a natural gift for it, but most wizards can learn the spell over time. It’s just like any other magic.”

Harry’s mouth was hanging open. “So Dumbledore has been able to hear my thoughts this entire time?”

Regulus chuckled. “Probably not all of them,” he conceded. “I doubt he’s poking around in there without permission, but if you’re thinking loudly, he can probably pick up on it.”

Harry swallowed harshly. “How do I stop myself from thinking loudly?”

“You use Occlumency. It’s like shutting the door to your mind. Sirius and I were taught how to use it as children, though Sirius was always much better at it than I was.”

“Who taught you?”

“My mother,” Regulus answered, cringing slightly. “She wasn’t a very gentle teacher, but we learned how to use it. It did come in handy at times.”

“Could I learn?” Harry asked. Regulus shrugged.

“I don’t see why not,” Regulus replied. “I wouldn’t know how to teach you, but I could try and look it up if you want.” Regulus paused to think about it for a moment. “Sirius would probably be a better person to ask.”

Harry looked uncertain but didn’t argue.

“Do you know where the Prefects’ bathroom is?”

“Yeah,” Regulus answered. “It’s on the fifth floor.”

“Were you a prefect?” Harry asked as they got up from eating and headed back out into the Entrance Hall.

“I was,” Regulus said softly. “Much to my parents’ delight. I hated it though. I never used the Prefects’ bathroom much, only a few times, it’s too far from the Slytherin common room to be convenient.”

“I wonder who in our year is going to be a prefect,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Hermione,” Regulus said. Harry chuckled and nodded.

“Yes, definitely Hermione,” Harry agreed.

“Here it is,” Regulus said once they passed the Boris the Bewildered statue that was just to the left of the entrance. “What’s the password?”

“Pine-fresh,” Harry whispered. There wasn’t anyone around to overhear them. The door audibly unlocked, and Harry pushed it open.

Regulus was immediately inundated with memories of coming to the bathroom with James. They had only done it once, a few weeks after their first kiss. Regulus had been so nervous, shooting vague insults at James the entire time because he had no idea what to do with his emotions. James took them all in stride, as he always did. His main response to hearing insults was fond affection.

He could still remember James taking all his clothes off, including his pants, far too comfortable being naked around others, before jumping into the water. Regulus was pretty sure that his entire face and neck were red with embarrassment trying not to look at him. He shook off the memories, the angry burn that came along with all his thoughts of James these days was too high a cost to reminisce.

The bathroom was just as beautiful as he remembered. The gold faucets lined the perimeter of the large pool, glittering in the morning light. The mermaid carved into the window pane moved around leisurely, glancing at them haphazardly before swimming off.

“Wow, this is way better than the Gryffindor showers,” Harry said, he was glancing around the room rapidly like he was trying to take in every single detail.

“Definitely,” Regulus said. He turned and locked the door, ensuring that no one else, even someone with the password, would be able to enter while they were using the room. “Remind me again what Cedric said we should do?”

“Just mull things over in the hot water,” Harry said, putting up air quotes as he spoke.

“He couldn’t give you exact instructions?” Regulus asked, shaking his head. Harry shrugged.

“Guess not,” Harry muttered. “What do you think we should do?”

Regulus sighed tiredly. “Mull things over in the hot water I suppose,” he said. He flicked his wand and instantly all the faucets turned on, the bath immediately beginning to fill with water, the soaps and oils were added as well, causing huge piles of bubbles to form.

Harry took off his clothes quickly until he was only in his pants and t-shirt, climbing into the water and breathing a loud sigh of relief when he was submerged in the water. “I wish I knew about this before,” Harry mumbled. His eyes were closed behind his glasses, which were heavily fogged up from the steam.

Regulus stripped down as well. The last time he was here he was only wearing his pants, though he took them off, rather embarrassingly, once he was fully submerged in the water. No one had seen him naked before, besides his family members when he was very young, and he couldn’t stand to be naked in front of James yet.

Even the first time the two of them had sex, it was in a very dark unused classroom. Regulus didn’t think he would have been able to handle it if it was in a well-lit room. He got over that eventually, of course, but it took some time.

He stayed in his pants and shirt this time, trying very hard not to think about how weird it was to be back in this same place with James’s son. It was under very different circumstances, but it was still a bit weird.

The moment he lowered his foot into the water, placing it on the first step, all thoughts of awkwardness flew from his mind. Instead, he thought about the last time he took a bath. It was during his first life. He used to sulk for hours in the bath at Grimmauld shortly before his death. After what happened in the cave, he’d never had another inclination to be submerged in water again.

He should have thought about this problem before coming here, but it had slipped his mind.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked. He was sitting against the wall on the opposite side of the bath, watching Regulus with a concerned expression.

“Fine,” Regulus answered through clenched teeth. He tried to take another step, but his body refused to move.

“Are you sure? You look like you’re shaking,” Harry said, his voice growing more unnerved.

“It’s fine, I just need a second,” Regulus said, silently begging Harry to let it go. He thanked every single wizard and witch he could think of when Harry just sighed quietly and turned around to look at the mermaid who had swum back into the frame.

The water wasn’t even cold. He had no issues with showering. There should be no reason for him to react this way to bath water. This water was so hot it nearly burned his skin. It was filled with floral-scented oils and bubbles. He wasn’t in the dark. It should not bother him this much.

It took him far longer than he cared to admit to force himself to take another step.

He was shaking slightly, but each step was easier than the last and finally, he was able to sink down into the water. Harry was watching him again, but he didn’t ask, and Regulus was grateful for it. He didn’t think he could explain what was happening to him while also standing in the water. There were only so many things he could handle at once.

“Now what?” Harry asked.

“Can you open it again?” Regulus asked, curious to hear the screeching Harry had described. Harry looked uncertain but reached for the egg and opened it.

Regulus was vaguely worried that the glass window might shatter. “Close it! Close it!” he yelled. Harry slammed it shut.

“I’d try putting it in the water if I were you.” It was so quiet in the bathroom now that the bath was full and the screaming had stopped, so both of them shouted in surprise when they heard her voice.

“Myrtle!” Harry yelled. “How long have you been in here?” He looked around in a panic as he spoke.

“Don’t worry. I closed my eyes when you got in,” Myrtle said dismissively. “Not that there was anything to see.” She stuck out her lower lip in a pout. Harry’s face was bright red.

“Did you say we should put it in the water?” Regulus asked.

“That’s what Cedric did,” Myrtle said, twirling around in the water.

“Have you been spying on him too?” Harry asked unhappily. “What do you do, sneak up here in the evenings to watch the perfects take baths?”

“Sometimes,” Myrtle said slyly. Regulus couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him. Harry looked properly offended by it, but Regulus couldn’t stop himself. There was a slight look of jealousy on Harry’s indignant face that Regulus found ridiculously funny. “I’ve never come out to speak to anyone before though.”

“We’re honored,” Regulus said with a broad smile. Myrtle returned it immediately, batting her eyelashes at him. Harry huffed before gripping the bottom of the egg and lowering it under the surface of the water. He spun the top and the egg fell open, a muffled sound emanating from it.

“You have to put your head under the water too!” Myrtle said with a high-pitched giggle. She seemed to be enjoying herself far too much. Harry grumbled but immediately dunked his head under the water.

Regulus tried to do it too, but he couldn’t move. The thought of the water around his nose, ears, and mouth was far too much to bear. He didn’t think he would be able to focus on listening when he was this distracted.

“It’s a song!” Harry yelled when he came above the water again. “Did you listen?”

“No,” Regulus said quickly. “What did the song say?”

“Put your head under and listen to it,” Harry said, dunking his head again. Regulus swallowed, gritted his teeth, and swallowed again.

Harry came up a second later. His mouth was open like he was going to say something but couldn’t do it. He was watching Regulus intensely. He snapped his mouth closed after a second.

“You don’t like being in the water, do you?”

“No,” Regulus said softly.

“Okay,” Harry said. “One second.” Harry submerged his face below the surface, this time for a long thirty seconds, before coming up gasping for air.

“What does the song say?” Regulus asked again.

*“ Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you’re searching, ponder this:
We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss,
An hour long you’ll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour — the prospect’s black,
Too late, it’s gone, it won’t come back. ”*

Harry had to say the lines one at a time, listening to the song again and again to make sure he had it right. By the end, he was watching Regulus with a look of stark panic on his face, clearly unsure what to think.

“Slow, aren’t you?” Myrtle simpered at them. Harry glared at her, but Regulus was distracted by the mermaid swimming out of the frame again.

“The Black Lake,” he mumbled. “Merpeople can’t sing above the ground and some of them live in the Black Lake.”

“Oooh, very good,” Myrtle said excitedly.

“They’re going to take something from me and hide it in the Black Lake?” Harry groaned.
“What do you think it’ll be? If I don’t participate, then I’ll never get it back.”

Yes, Regulus thought, that does complicate things a bit.

Chapter End Notes

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the second task.

Chapter Notes

you already knew this was coming

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The second task snuck up on them faster than Regulus would have expected. Since the Yule Ball, nearly all of his available time was spent doing some kind of research, either on the Founders of Hogwarts or how to breathe underwater, or trying to figure out what in Salazar's name was going on in the castle. Things were growing weirder and weirder as the second task approached.

Rita Skeeter had written a terrible article outing Hagrid as half-giant, apparently based on an overheard conversation from the night of the Yule Ball that was between Hagrid and Madame Maxime. No one had any idea how she had managed to sneak onto the property in order to hear their conversation, and something about it was making Regulus distinctly nervous. Regulus thought Hagrid wasn't going to come back to teaching at all after the article came out, but Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna, with the help of Dumbledore, were able to get him to leave his hut and return to classes.

Moody seemed to be trying to help Harry, if in a roundabout way. He caught Harry sneaking around the castle, apparently fully capable of seeing through the invisibility cloak, and had covered for him when he was almost caught by Filch and Snape. However, this confrontation ended with Moody "borrowing" the map from Harry, a truly terrible thing. Regulus would have yelled at Harry if it wasn't already clear how terrible he felt. If Regulus wasn't already suspicious of Moody, he would have broken into his office and stolen the map back. As it was, he didn't want to risk drawing any more attention to himself than he had to.

That night also led them to the discovery that Moody had apparently searched Snape's office. Ron and Harry thought that maybe Moody had been asked to keep an eye on Snape as well as Karkaroff, but Regulus wasn't sure. There was something in the way Moody watched Snape that reminded him of how Moody watched Regulus, with a disdainful suspicion that never seemed to fade. Besides, Snape was just as worried about the way his Dark Mark was changing as Regulus was, he was doing a good job at hiding it, but Regulus could understand how he felt. He was a traitor and the Dark Lord would want revenge.

Ludo Bagman also tried again to offer Harry help on the task while they were on a visit to Hogsmeade, pulling him aside in the Three Broomsticks. It was very suspicious behavior that Regulus did not appreciate. Regulus hadn't been with them at the time, having snuck off to talk to Remus about the ways someone might spend an hour underwater without dying.

That entire day was derailed when Regulus discovered that Remus and Sirius were once again fighting. He had no idea what about, but Sirius wasn't there when he went to meet Remus, even though he said he would be, and when Regulus called Sirius on the mirror later that evening it was clear that Sirius was not doing well, his hair matted again, his eyes sunken into his too-thin face.

Regulus didn't have the energy or inclination to deal with the issues in Remus and Sirius's relationship, but he wished they would work out whatever was happening between them so they could be more helpful. Why couldn't they have relationship drama after the Triwizard Tournament? Or better yet, after the Dark Lord was dead.

The plan was still to do nothing during the second task despite the statement that Harry would lose whatever it was that was taken forever. Regulus was pretty sure that they wouldn't actually keep whatever they took, there was nothing in the rules about losing your belongings, and it seemed like an unreasonably cruel outcome to failing a task. Especially one that was already so dangerous. Harry was worried his broom would be taken, and Regulus had assured him that if that happened, he would make sure Harry got a replacement. It wasn't like the Black Vaults would be even marginally affected by a new broom.

However, there was still a worry that the task would make it so Harry was in danger if he wasn't prepared. Regulus had no idea how they would put the champions to start, they could place them underwater first regardless of how prepared they were, so they were coming up with contingencies just in case. Sirius suggested a Bubble-Head charm, which wasn't a terrible idea, but was also very finicky. If Harry couldn't perfect it in time, then he would risk drowning, a fate Regulus wouldn't wish on his worst enemy.

Regulus wasn't sure what else to do. They were in the library late the night before the task, Harry with his head down on the desk as he groaned pathetically about whatever item he was going to lose in the lake. It was a common complaint over the last few weeks, and it was starting to do Regulus's head in.

"I've said this a million times, they can't just take things from you," Regulus said. "It's fine. I'm sure they will give you whatever it is back."

"Maybe I should try the Bubble-Head Charm again?" Harry said, lifting his head to say the words, a small pout on his face.

"You already know it well enough to get out of the water," Regulus said dismissively. "That's plenty."

"If you say so," Harry muttered petulantly. "Ron, any ideas?"

Ron was in the middle of re-reading a copy of the Quidditch magazine Harry had a subscription to. "Ideas about what?" he said distractedly.

"What do you mean about what? Haven't you been paying attention?" Hermione asked sharply.

“I told you there are plants you can use to breathe underwater,” Luna said. Regulus thought it was the closest she had ever been to sounding exasperated.

“Yes, the only problem is that none of those plants are real,” Hermione said snidely. She was clearly tired, and she and Ron were still on the outs, it was making her more annoyed than usual.

Luna glared at her, actually glared. Regulus didn’t think he would have ever seen Luna make a face like that.

“Just because you’re narrow-minded, doesn’t mean that I’m lying,” Luna said.

“Ron, you don’t *see* anything, do you?” Harry interrupted to ask again.

Ron finally looked up from his magazine, but Hermione replied before Ron could even open his mouth. “He’s not a seer, seers aren’t real,” she said, her hair seemed to grow bigger every time she spoke in that sharp, stressed tone.

“Hermione,” Regulus said warningly.

“Don’t tell me you believe him?” she said. “You said it yourself, Trelawney is a fraud.”

“I said that she seems like a charlatan, not that she actually is. I have no idea if she’s the real thing or not,” Regulus replied tiredly.

They had been having this conversation a lot in the last two months. Mostly because Trelawney had outright said that Ron had the *gift* in the middle of class, and Ron seemed to be letting the attention go to his head. Lavender and Parvati were very impressed. Even though Parvati had had a terrible time with Ron at the Yule Ball, something that Regulus had apologized profusely about, Parvati had promptly gotten over it when she realized that Ron had a talent for Divination.

Regulus had no idea if Ron actually had a gift for it. Trelawney seemed to pick a new student to dote on every couple of weeks, and he was pretty sure she was going to toss Ron aside the first time he made an improper prediction.

“This is useless,” Hermione practically growled.

“What are you two doing here?” Ron asked. Regulus followed his eye-line to see Fred and George walking through the library. He didn’t think that he’d ever actually seen the twins in the library before.

“Looking for Regulus and Hermione,” George replied. “McGonagall needs to talk to both of you.”

“Why?” Hermione asked, looking panicked.

“Dunno,” Fred said. “She was looking a bit grim, though.”

“We’re supposed to take you down to her office,” George said.

“Fine,” Regulus said. He wasn’t making any more headway tonight anyway, and with Hermione going with him, at least there would be less fighting between her, Luna, and Ron. “Harry, you need to get some sleep. We can practice the Bubble-Head Charm in the morning before the task.”

Harry nodded tiredly and started packing up his belongings. Regulus and Hermione followed Fred and George up to McGonagall’s office. The twins walked several paces ahead of them whispering quickly to each other, their voices completely incomprehensible.

“Hermione, I think you should lay off Luna,” Regulus said quietly.

“Of course, you would side with her,” Hermione responded loudly. Regulus sighed.

“I’m not siding with her, I’m not taking sides,” Regulus said. “But Luna is our friend, if she wants to believe in animals and plants that you don’t think are real, then I think we should let her.”

“So you agree? You don’t think what she’s talking about is real?” Hermione said sharply.

“You know that’s not what I said,” Regulus said. “Stop trying to back me into a corner. Luna cares about you, and it clearly hurts her feelings when you talk down to her like that.”

Hermione looked insulted and turned her head away from him as they kept walking. Regulus knew it would take time, she was just stressed and clearly going through something, but he wasn’t trying to hurt her. He knew she cared about Ron and Luna, she just had a funny way of showing it sometimes.

“Good luck,” George said when the twins dropped them off, a dramatically large frown on his face. Regulus shook his head fondly before entering the office.

“Miss Granger, Mr. Black,” McGonagall said, standing up from where she was reading over something at her desk. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“What’s going on, Professor?” Hermione asked, her voice shaking slightly. Regulus knew how much she hated to be called into professors’ offices. She seemed to always be afraid that she was about to be expelled, despite not doing anything wrong.

“You both have been selected to participate in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament,” McGonagall said. She had an unhappy look on her face that was making Regulus feel unsettled.

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked nervously.

“Each of the champions will be required to rescue the person most important to them,” McGonagall explained. “Mr. Krum will rescue you Miss Granger and Mr. Potter will rescue you, Mr. Black.”

“You’re going to put us in the lake,” Hermione said, it wasn’t a question.

“That is correct, but you will be under a heavy sleeping charm. You will not feel or notice a thing.”

“What happens if our champions don’t get to us on time?” Regulus asked.

“The merpeople will bring you back,” McGonagall said. “Don’t worry, you will not be in any danger.”

“Okay,” Hermione said uncertainly. “I didn’t realize I was important to Krum,” she mumbled to herself, so low that Regulus almost didn’t hear her.

“Are you both ready?”

“What about our stuff?” Regulus asked.

“The elves will return it to your dorm room. Now, if you wouldn’t mind placing your items on the ground.”

Regulus was having an out-of-body experience. He was completely disconnected from the world around him as he lowered his bag off of his shoulder and onto the ground, watching disjointedly as McGonagall raised her wand to point it at both of them. A second later he was gone.

The next second he was drowning. The cold water was like a shock to his already confused system. All thoughts of what he had been doing a moment ago were gone, he couldn’t think of anything but the icy water he was trying to escape. He tried to use his arms to fight his way to the surface, but they were shaking so badly that they were virtually useless to him.

His face surfaced for a moment, just long enough for him to suck in a breath of air, but it was a mistake, and a second after that he was sinking beneath the frigid water once again, now with a large gulp of it flooding into his lungs, burning him from the inside.

Something sharp attached to the collar of his shirt. *The inferi*. Fuck, he forgot about the inferi. They were back, he had to get them off. His arms felt so weak though, his lungs burned, and he was losing consciousness fast. All he could see when he opened his eyes was dark water, all of it too opaque to see through.

The sharp nails of the inferi were latched on his collar and dragging him down. At least he thought it was down, he was disoriented and he was dying. Again. Black shadows were taking over his already limited vision. He could feel his body trying to cough and breathe at the same time, taking in more freezing water into his lungs every couple of seconds.

One moment before his vision was truly gone, he broke out of the water again. He could feel his body being dragged onto the ground. His eyes were closed, and he couldn’t breathe, the water in his lungs preventing him. He couldn’t move at all, couldn’t scream, couldn’t fight.

“*Ejicere*,” he heard a panicked voice say. The water in his lungs moved on its own then, shooting up his windpipe and out his mouth. It felt like glass shredding him as it forced its

way out, but all he could do was cough and struggle. “Sirius, calm down,” they whispered fiercely. “You can’t draw any more attention to yourself here.”

Once the water was gone and all that remained was the pain in his throat, he finally was able to take note of how the rest of his body felt. He was shivering harshly, the cold wind causing the freezing water to drop to a point where every piece of exposed skin hurt. There was something warm worming its way between his arms, he had no idea what, but his trembling arms came up automatically and hugged it against his chest. He leaned his head down on it, feeling soft fur tickle his nose.

“He said he didn’t like water,” Harry said suddenly, his worried voice very close to Regulus’s ear. “I didn’t know he couldn’t swim.”

“He can swim,” Remus said quietly. “I think he was just... surprised.” That was a nice way of putting it.

“Harry, man, you were first! You were the first one out of the water. Cedric just now came up with Cho,” Ron said. Regulus rested his head even harder on the furry object he was holding. It hurt to breathe, worse than anything he had ever felt, so all he could do was sit and wait. He didn’t think he could talk even if he tried, and he was too tired to try.

“I think I should take Regulus inside,” Remus said. He must have moved away to talk to someone.

“Yes, of course,” McGonagall said.

“Regulus, can you walk?” Remus said quietly. Regulus lifted his head, a difficult feat given his exhaustion, and managed to open his eyes. Remus’s face was right in front of his, his eyebrows furrowed in worry.

“Yes,” he croaked, immediately cringing at the feeling of his torn throat. He started to move so that he could stand and the warmth against his chest wiggled away. He finally looked at it to see Sirius in his transfigured animagus form, the same one he had for the first task. Suddenly the sharpness pulling at his collar made sense, Sirius must have jumped into the water and dragged him to the bank of the lake.

Remus placed a hand under one of his arms and all but pulled him to his feet. Without Remus’s support, he was sure he would have wobbled dangerously or fallen flat on his face, but Remus kept him upright as they started walking back up to the castle. He was glad that he was there to keep him from embarrassing himself further.

“Harry, you stay down here,” Remus said over his shoulder. “You still need to hear your score. I’m just going to take Regulus up to the Hospital Wing.”

Regulus tried to turn to look at Harry, possibly to say something reassuring, but turning his head even slightly made him dizzy, and he ended up stumbling over his feet. Remus’s hand around his arm tightened, practically carrying him.

They moved slowly, Regulus only capable of walking so quickly, his limbs still aching from the cold water and his earlier panic. Sirius walked next to them, his warm body lingering against Regulus's legs as he moved. Sirius was staring at the ground ahead of him, the muscles in his face pulled into a tight expression.

"Wait," Regulus said. Or tried to say, his throat hurt so badly. "Moody."

"What?" Remus said, though he didn't stop, continuing to move them slowly up the hill to the castle. "What about Moody?"

"He has the —" Regulus broke off to cough, though that only made the pain ten times worse, "the map."

"The map?"

"Moody has the map," Regulus said, by the time the last word was spoken, he could taste blood in his mouth.

"Moody has the map," Remus repeated thoughtfully like he was trying to puzzle out what Regulus meant. Regulus implored him to understand, he didn't think he could speak again if he tried. "The map," Remus said again.

Regulus reached out and pointed exaggeratedly at Sirius.

"Oh!" Remus said, the point finally clicking. "Sirius, you have to go," he whispered. "Moody has the map, so he'll be able to tell who you really are." Sirius was giving Remus an unfathomable expression. Or at least, Regulus had no way of deciphering it. Remus seemed to understand though, sighing quietly. "Harry is safe. I'll make sure that Regulus gets to the Hospital Wing, just go. I'll find you after."

Sirius looked at them both for one more long second before taking off toward the Forbidden Forest. Remus didn't speak again until they walked through the doors of the castle. They were completely out of eyeshot of everyone and Remus must have grown tired of the slow walking. He cast a quick lightening charm on Regulus and picked him up. Regulus groaned in surprise, but promptly shut up when the sound caused more blood to fill his mouth.

"Sorry, but you're very slow," Remus said. Regulus didn't protest, he didn't really care to. Instead, he rested his head against Remus's shoulder and shut his eyes, enjoying the soft movement of being carried through the castle.

Chapter End Notes

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the offer.

Chapter Notes

there is some sexual content in this chapter under the line break.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Father,” Sirius said stiffly. He was thankful his voice didn’t waiver. “Where is Mother?”

“In her room,” Orion replied. “Best if you do not disturb her. I do not believe she would want to see you.”

“Has she ever wanted to see me?” Sirius muttered reflexively.

Orion looked up for the first time since Sirius entered the room. He was sitting in front of the fireplace in his parlor. Sirius had so many horrible memories of this room, but they all felt distant now. As if they were all placed behind a thick layer of glass, impenetrable and incapable of touching him.

He wondered if his father was thinking of those memories too. He wondered if his father even remembered those moments. All those punishments, all that pain and suffering and fear. What did it even mean to a person like Orion Black?

His father looked much worse than the last time Sirius had seen him. It had been almost four years since he laid eyes on that man. It had been in this same room, under very different circumstances. His mother had been screaming, rage and hurt flashing across her face in a duel to the death, his father brandishing his wand as he lazily dulled out burning hexes like they were nothing more than first-year charms. His brother — his brother had been in his room, hiding as always.

His father looked almost healthy then, at least significantly more healthy than he did now. His salt and pepper hair had gone completely gray in the last few years. His beard was patchy and misshapen. His skin was sallow and waxy-looking. Sirius wondered if his mother was poisoning him, he wouldn’t be surprised.

“She did used to,” Orion said. “But you are correct. It has been quite a long time.”

“What do you want?” Sirius snapped. He didn’t need to be reminded that his mother didn’t love him. He knew that fact very well.

“She loves you, in her own way,” Orion mumbled. Sirius bristled, his Occlumency walls slamming shut automatically.

“Don’t dig around in my head,” Sirius snapped.

“My apologies,” Orion said lazily, not an ounce of remorse in his voice.

“What do you *want* ?” Sirius repeated. He’d had enough of being in this forsaken house. It was terrible before, it was unbearable now, now that —

“Regulus is —”

“I know,” Sirius said grimly. He meant to snap, he meant to sound angry, to put every shred of resentment into his words, to make sure his father knew that Sirius blamed him for Regulus’s death. Instead, the words just sounded sad.

“It is time for you to give up this foolishness,” Orion said, his voice harsher than it had been a moment ago. “It is time for you to come home.”

“Come home?” Sirius asked incredulously. “You *disowned* me. Don’t know if you forgot.”

“I have not forgotten, Sirius,” Orion said. “But that was before. This family needs an heir. We are prepared to welcome you back into the fold.”

“Welcome me — why would you think I would ever come back to his hell house?”

“Hell house,” Orion muttered. “A muggle phrase, no doubt.” Orion shook his head slightly, disdain evident on his face. “You have had your fun and we have allowed you to carry on.”

“Allowed me?!” Sirius shouted. He needed to stop just repeating the words coming out of his father’s mouth, but he was so aghast by what he was hearing that he could do little else.

“Yes,” Orion snarled, his sudden rage causing Sirius to take a small step back. He regretted the show of weakness, recognizing the predatory look on his father’s face. “How do you think this will all play out?”

“What do you mean?” Sirius said tightly.

“Do you think this war will end in your favor? Do you think your friends, your *lover* ,” his face twitched at the word, “will survive this?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sirius replied.

“Especially with your involvement,” Orion said, getting up from his armchair to stand in the center of the room. Sirius didn’t flinch. He consciously did not flinch. But the sight of his father in the same place he had been the last time they had spoken made it a struggle for him.

Sirius didn’t reply, he didn’t know what to say.

“We both know your friends are worse off with your involvement.”

“That’s a lie,” Sirius whispered.

“You have made them into targets, merely by spending time with them,” Orion said.

“Shut up!” Sirius yelled, taking a step toward his father. Orion merely rocked his head back and forth lazily, before sitting back down, the brief movement exhausting his dying body. And he was dying, Sirius realized. That’s why he looked so terrible, that’s why he was making this last ploy to reach out to Sirius. Orion was on his way out, and they both knew it.

“Son,” he said, the title like poison, “you need to find a way to live your life so that you are not hurting others.”

“I’m not hurting them —”

“I have known you for two decades now, and I know how you are,” Orion said tiredly, his energy clearly draining quickly.

“You don’t know anything about me,” Sirius hissed.

“You have spent your life hurting everyone around you,” Orion replied. “Your mother can barely stand to think of you. I have been nothing but disappointed. And your brother —”

Sirius’s eyes snapped open. He didn’t usually have dreams like that as Padfoot, but he could feel the moment he woke that he was still in his animagus form. The world was all grays and yellows, mildly distracting really, though that was welcome after that memory.

He remembered getting so drunk after the meeting with his father that Remus had to come hunt him down two days later, scrapping him off the streets of London and nursing him back to health. Or as close to health as he could be at the time. After his brother’s death, he was never quite healthy again.

The words his father had spoken dug into him like a battering ram, destroying everything in the process. They ate away at him. It was like his father could see every shadow in his head, every self-conscious fear that existed inside of him.

The worst part of it all was that his father had been right. James and Lily died because they knew him. He was the one who suggested they switch to Peter, worse than that, he could still remember staying up late with James talking about whether they should take Dumbledore up on his offer to be secret keeper. Sirius had been part of convincing James not to. James was all too willing to agree, to put his wife and son’s life on the line in the name of friendship. Their deaths were his fault.

Remus spent years transforming alone, he was cut out of their friend group because Sirius didn’t trust him. He kept him around, he stayed with him, but he never treated Remus like he deserved to be treated. He wasn’t good for him. He wasn’t good for anyone.

And Regulus... Well, his brother died because Sirius left him behind. The fact that Regulus had miraculously come back to life meant little when Sirius remembered that he went through so many terrible years because Sirius wasn’t a good enough brother.

Sirius didn’t even have to wonder why he was dreaming of that conversation. Seeing his brother drown all over again had definitely triggered it. He was still struck by how haunting it

was to watch his brother's head break through the surface for a split second before he started sinking. He didn't even think twice before diving into the water to drag him to shore. Harry was there trying to help, but Sirius couldn't even think of anything but not letting Regulus die again, certainly not right in front of him.

He wondered if Remus would be upset with him for doing that, for breaking the lead and sprinting into the water like that. He wondered if Remus would even bother to come talk to him at all. They hadn't actually spoken for a few weeks now.

It all went wrong two days after Christmas. Sirius had hung around in Remus's room at the Three Broomsticks over the Christmas holiday. Things were better than Sirius ever remembered them being. He was warm and full and happy for three whole days. Then the day after Boxing Day, Sirius went and did something stupid.

Remus was just looking so cuddly and kind, his eyes an amber color that seemed to draw Sirius in. They were drinking firewhisky and had been for a few hours at that point. Sirius just couldn't help himself. He leaned in, pulled himself out of his chair, and kissed him.

Remus's lips were rougher than he remembered, though Sirius would guess his were as well. It didn't matter. They were kissing and that was all that mattered. That was all that ever mattered to Sirius. Remus groaned against his mouth, pushing up as he grabbed Sirius's face with both of his hands.

Everything moved so quickly after that. Sirius had to tip his head back to kiss Remus, pushing up onto his toes so that he could pull on the roots of his hair. He fumbled with Remus's belt, unlatching it quickly and shoving Remus's pants down far enough so that he could get his hands around his cock, both hands because Sirius never did things halfway.

Touching him was the best thing Sirius had ever felt, made even better by the fact that Remus let him, moaning quietly against him the entire time. Sirius licked a wide stripe under Remus's ear, right where he knew Remus loved it, before dropping to his knees.

The thing is, Sirius had spent his entire life enduring people telling him what he was made for. The Black heir, the one meant to lead the family, the great family shame, the disowned pureblood, the lone lion in a pit of snakes. The shining point for those who stood against Voldemort, the example of how people weren't like their family. The traitor, the escaped prisoner, the madman. The one who would never be anything but a Black.

None of that ever phased him because Sirius already knew exactly what he was made for. He was made for sucking Remus's cock and nothing else. He was pretty sure all of his happiest moments were him on his knees. Not that he would ever share that with anyone, not even on threat of death, though he was pretty sure Remus already knew how he felt.

At least, Sirius thought he did.

"This is a mistake," Remus muttered. Sirius opened his eyes and dislodged himself enough to look at Remus's face which was stricken with horror and regret.

"What?" Sirius breathed.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” Remus said. “This is a mistake.”

Sirius wasn’t sure that he even said anything else. Why Remus felt like a good time to reject him was when Sirius was actively going down on him, Sirius would never know. He wished Remus would have kicked him long before he managed to get on his knees for him. He didn’t need to add that embarrassing memory to his life full of shame.

They hadn’t spoken since then. Sirius showed up the morning of the second task, already transformed into Padfoot, and didn’t bother to change back before Remus transfigured him a disguise and placed the collar around his neck.

After the entire debacle with Regulus almost dying right in front of him, Sirius had run through the Forbidden Forest for nearly an hour just to work off some of the hectic energy that was buzzing under his skin. He went back to the cave after that, curling up next to Buckbeak, and promptly fell asleep. He had no idea how late it was now, though based on his limited view of the sky from inside his cave, he would guess it was early evening.

He closed his eyes again but didn’t fall asleep. It was almost like meditating, being in animagus form, all those painful thoughts and anxieties were quieted to a background hum, incomprehensible to his animal mind. He could hear much better as Padfoot. He could hear the sounds of running water and small animals outside the cave. It was nice, relaxing in a way he almost never experienced anymore.

It was another few hours before he heard the soft footsteps of someone climbing up toward the cave entrance. He didn’t bother to even lift his head, he already knew who it was. He would recognize those footsteps anywhere.

“Sirius?” Remus called softly. The cave was dark this late in the evening, though Sirius was sure Remus could see through it, his eyes supernaturally sensitive to the darkness. “*Incendio*,” Remus whispered, relighting the fire in the center of the cave.

Sirius watched him walk in and sit down a few feet away, much closer than Sirius would have expected. Remus was watching him with a measured, unreadable look. He had a bag with him and Sirius could smell the enticing scent of roasted chicken wafting out of it. His stomach rumbled loudly.

“Will you transform back? I want to talk to you,” Remus said. Sirius really did not want to do that. He wanted to be petty and stay as Padfoot all night, waiting until Remus left in a huff, but he was pretty sure he wouldn’t get any of the food Remus brought if he did that, and ultimately his hunger won out. His body shivered with magic as he transformed quickly.

“If you’re here to berate me about jumping in to get Regulus, then can you save it for after dinner? I’m not going to apologize for it anyways,” Sirius said, perhaps a bit too sharply given the way Remus’s face fell.

“I would never ask you to apologize for that,” Remus said. “I was a second away from summoning him out of the water myself.”

Sirius breathed an audible sigh of relief, his shoulders relaxing finally. “That’s how he died,” Sirius said quietly. “He said he drowned. I couldn’t let it happen again.”

“I know,” Remus said. Sirius glanced up to find Remus watching him with that soft, tender look that Sirius so often found irresistible. He wasn’t about to fall for that trap again.

“What did you bring?” he asked to break the tension.

“Oh,” Remus said. “Part of the feast from Hogwarts.” He handed the bag to Sirius who quickly reached in pulling out plates and plates of food, all charmed to stay warm. “Sorry it took a bit, I wanted to make sure Harry and Regulus were both okay.”

“And were they?” Sirius asked around a mouthful of food. Remus gave him a small, fond smile.

“Yes, Pomfrey fixed Regulus up quickly, he was sleeping when I left. Harry wasn’t injured.”

“How did Harry do it?” They had arrived late to the task, right as the champions were jumping in the water, so Sirius wasn’t able to catch Harry casting a spell.

“Gillyweed apparently,” Remus answered, shrugging slightly. “Dobby stole it for him.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Sirius said.

“It’s pretty rare, but if ingested, you grow gills and webbed feet and hands. Dobby said he overheard Moody talking about it.”

“Useful,” Sirius muttered, stuffing a handful of roasted potatoes into his mouth.

“I brought silverware, you know,” Remus said though he was smiling widely. Sirius shrugged haphazardly. “Harry got a 45 on the task. He’s still in last place, but it was the highest score given today.”

“He bloody well deserved it,” Sirius said. “He was leagues before the others.” Remus nodded. “I thought the plan wasn’t to participate though? Didn’t Regulus say they were — what was it? Protesting.”

“Yes, but Harry was under the impression that Regulus would be in real danger if he didn’t go down to get him.”

“What? He thought they were just going to keep them down there if the champions didn’t succeed?” Sirius asked incredulously.

“No,” Remus said, chuckling slightly. “He said that Ron was with him when they realized that Regulus and Hermione were taken, Harry originally thought Regulus would die if he didn’t rescue him, but Ron apparently explained to him that they would probably be released either way. None of the people taken were magically bound to the tournament so they couldn’t just kill them.”

“Smart kid,” Sirius said.

“He’s quite the strategist,” Remus agreed. “But anyways, Harry still knew that Regulus didn’t like water. I don’t think he knows that’s how Regulus died the first time, but he knew enough to rescue Regulus. Hence the Gillyweed and first place score.”

Sirius shook his head fondly. “He and Regulus are so…” He wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence.

“Protective,” Remus supplied. Sirius nodded. Remus gave him another one of his long, measured looks before taking a deep, fortifying breath. Sirius tensed up immediately. “I wanted to apologize.”

“No need,” Sirius said quickly, waving him off. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not,” Remus said, so softly that Sirius nearly didn’t hear him. “So much time has passed.”

“Remus!” Sirius shouted. He was on his feet, though he didn’t remember standing. “It’s really fine. I’m not upset. Can we just drop it?”

Remus looked startled, his mouth hanging open slightly. “Sirius, I’m trying to tell you —”

“I won’t try it again,” Sirius said quickly, sweeping his hands out erratically. He didn’t need Remus to let me down gently. The last rejection had been more than enough. “I understand if you don’t — I know you don’t want me like that anymore.”

“I never said that,” Remus said firmly. He was standing now too. “I never said I didn’t want you, but —”

“Then what?” Sirius shouted. Things were getting out of hand quickly, but Sirius wasn’t sure how to get himself back on track. “What else could you possibly mean by calling it a mistake when your dick was in my mouth?”

“Neither of us is in a place where we can handle something like this,” Remus said, his voice had shifted again. He sounded almost like a professor like he was slipping into his teaching persona just to lecture Sirius. “You’re living in a cave for Merlin’s sake!”

“I wanted to be close to Harry,” Sirius said through clenched teeth, “in case something happened.”

“I know that,” Remus conceded, still talking in that awful steady voice.

“Then you don’t get to use it as an excuse,” Sirius snapped.

“I think we need more time before trying anything like that again,” Remus said over him as if he didn’t even hear Sirius speak. “You’re still a wanted man. You haven’t had a moment of freedom since you were twenty.” Sirius felt like he had been slapped.

“So what? I’m too inexperienced for you ‘cause I haven’t had time to bed half of England?” Sirius snarled. His magic cracked dangerously across his fingernails. Azkaban had done a

number on his accidental magic, turning him into a dangerous time bomb that could go off at any moment.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Remus whispered. His eyes were dancing with anguish and some other mixture of emotions that Sirius couldn’t hope to understand. He knew it meant he was getting too close to saying something that would cause the evening to erupt into chaos. Sirius had never been known for his ability to stop himself though.

“Oh, spare me. I’m not stupid enough to believe you spent the last decade loyal to a man you let rot in prison,” Sirius yelled.

Remus’s face moved through emotions like lightning, flashing across his face in a moment of violence. Sirius felt regret immediately. Remus’s life was worse with Sirius in it. Sirius sighed, the anger taking all his remaining energy, and collapsed back onto the ground.

“If you don’t want me, then I would rather you just tell me,” Sirius said quietly before squeezing his eyes shut. The following words he spoke were said with more vulnerability than anything he’d said in years. “You’re the only friend I have left, and I would rather have you as my friend, than not have you at all.” It was a selfish plea given how often he seemed to hurt Remus, but he made it regardless.

Sirius expected Remus to leave, he expected him to yell before storming out. That was always Remus’s go-to when they would fight. He would have some devastated final word that would remind Sirius how terrible of a boyfriend he was, and then he would leave to cool off.

That’s why he jumped so violently when he felt Remus’s hand on his back. Remus didn’t move away, he just held it there, firmly rubbing Sirius’s back through his thin sweater.

“You have always been the most important person in my life, Sirius,” Remus said quietly. Sirius squeezed his eyes shut even harder, so hard that he could see lights dancing behind his eyelids. “It’s not because you’re inexperienced or some other nonsense like that. It’s because you spent more than twelve years being tortured. It’s because I spent twelve years missing a man I thought killed my closest friends.”

Sirius let out a quiet sob, covering his face with both of his hands, trying to smother the noise.

“I think we need more time,” Remus said gently. “But there has never once in my entire life been a moment when I didn’t want you. Okay?”

Sirius noticed that he didn’t deny his accusation about bedding half of England, though he guessed that would have to be a conversation left for another day.

“Okay,” Sirius said miserably. He felt a bit like a scolded child, but Remus just wrapped his arms around Sirius’s shoulders and held him as he calmed back down. They were silent for a long time, the only noise was the crackling of the fire. When Remus spoke again, it was with a solemnness that Sirius hadn’t heard in a long time.

“I think I know what another Horcrux is.”

Chapter End Notes

in the books, ron immediately tells harry that there was no way they were going to actually kill any of the people taken.

on tumblr, i post my exact update schedule, as well as sneak peeks of upcoming chapters and thoughts about the story. [maladaptivewriting](https://maladaptivewriting.tumblr.com/). You can also follow me on tiktok under the same username.

the diadem.

Chapter Notes

here this is a day early

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

James was with him when he woke up. He was running his lifeless fingers through Regulus's hair, gently brushing his forehead every couple of seconds. He had a tender smile on his face, but his eyes were elsewhere, watching something else in the Hospital Wing.

"James," Regulus said softly. James glanced down at him, just as someone else spoke.

"Oh, you're awake," Harry said. Regulus turned his head to see Harry and Hermione sitting beside his hospital bed, both of them wrapped in soft-looking blankets. They were both giving him odd looks that he did not appreciate.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"A few hours," Hermione answered. "Professor Lupin left just a bit ago. He said he needed to talk to Dumbledore."

Regulus could still feel the light pressure of James's fingers against his head, he wondered if Hermione and Harry could see his hair moving.

"How are you both feeling? What happened during the task?" Regulus asked, slowly pushing himself up so that he was sitting. The potions Pomfrey had given him had worked wonders and his throat didn't hurt at all. However, his body still ached slightly, but he figured that was to be expected.

It took them about half an hour to unravel the story of what happened during the task. Harry panicked when he found out that both Regulus and Hermione had been taken. He was planning to use the Bubble-Head Charm that they had practiced to rescue Regulus from the water, but Dobby had found them shortly before the task to give him Gillyweed. Dobby and Moody's involvement was highly suspect to Regulus but he wasn't sure what to make of it.

Regulus was a little disappointed to hear that Harry had managed to get first place and the highest score of the task given their original plan, but he wasn't too hard on him. He could see from the look on Harry's face that he had just been worried and Regulus couldn't fault him for that.

The most surprising aspect was the fact that Moaning Myrtle had intervened to tell Harry where to go once he was in the Lake. Regulus would have to make sure and thank her for her help. She always did have a soft spot for Harry.

Pomfrey came over a short while after Regulus woke up and shoed Harry and Hermione out of the Hospital Wing. Regulus felt fine, but Pomfrey insisted that he stay overnight at least just to make sure there were no lasting effects on his lungs. He could still be at risk of drowning despite the water being removed from his lungs hours earlier. At least, that's what the medi-witch said.

"I can't believe Sirius jumped in that water to save you like that," James said once they were alone.

"Yeah, who would have thought?" Regulus replied. James was watching him with an odd look in his eyes, Regulus couldn't place it. "What?"

"You're so important to them," James said softly.

"Huh?" Regulus said distractedly.

"Sirius and Harry," James explained. Regulus gave him a long look.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Regulus said slowly.

"No, that's not what I mean," James said, shaking his head slightly. He dropped his hand away from Regulus's hair and intertwined their fingers. "I just only ever knew you as an outsider, and now you have this place in their lives. It's —"

Regulus watched him curiously as James tried to parse out his own meaning. He kept searching around the room like it would give him the answers.

"It's the place you would have had," Regulus supplied. James looked at him with surprise. "In their lives, if you had survived, Harry and Sirius would feel this way about you and not me."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," James mumbled. They stared at each other for a long moment. Regulus couldn't quite understand how James was feeling and his face gave nothing away.

"Are you upset with me?" Regulus asked finally, he couldn't bear the silence any longer.

"No," James said, his face softening instantly. "Of course not."

"Then what is it?" Regulus persisted. He could feel that James was holding back.

"I guess — I guess I'm a bit jealous is all," James admitted, looking abashed and awkward.

"I'm sorry," Regulus said, feeling just as awkward.

"No, no!" James shouted. Regulus jumped slightly in surprise. "Don't be sorry," James said, quieter this time. "I just — I'm happy it's you, but —"

"It's okay if you have complicated feelings about it all," Regulus conceded. "I know that it should be you or Lily here, instead of me."

James looked haunted for a second, but he schooled his features quickly. Not quickly enough for Regulus to miss it though.

“You know I would give it all up if it meant you and L — Lily could be here instead,” Regulus said, choking on the words slightly.

“Regulus, please,” James said frantically. “Please stop. Please don’t say that. That’s not what I want.”

“How can it not be what you want?” Regulus asked though he mumbled the words to himself like he wasn’t speaking out loud.

James sighed then fell quiet for a long moment. “You’re right, my feelings are complicated,” James said finally.

He was looking out the window now, his eyes far away. His hand was still wrapped around Regulus’s, but Regulus couldn’t feel him nearly as much as he could a few moments before. It was odd, like a melancholy emptiness was taking over, pulling James even farther away from him, though Regulus had no idea how to fix it. They didn’t speak again and it wasn’t long before Regulus fell back asleep. When he woke the next morning, James was gone.

The aftermath of the second task came down in the form of Rita Skeeter's articles. The first one was a piece in the *Prophet* about Remus Lupin, previous Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor, and rumored unregistered werewolf, whose crup jumped into the Black Lake the moment Regulus Black broke through the surface. Rita argued that the crup's actions should have disqualified Harry from winning, but that clearly Dumbledore didn’t agree. The article was full of a bunch of insidious speculation and anti-werewolf sentiment, with Rita writing about whether werewolves should even be allowed to own pets, let alone well-trained magical ones.

Regulus was horrified to read it, though beyond grateful that there wasn’t even a hint of who that crup could actually be. Hermione was enraged by the article, ranting all morning about how unfair it was that Rita could just claim Lupin was a werewolf based solely on rumor.

“That could ruin someone’s life, don’t you get that?” Hermione snapped at Regulus who had merely expressed relief that Sirius wasn’t at direct risk.

“Yes, Hermione,” Regulus said tiredly. “I’m not disagreeing with you.” It went on like that through most of breakfast. Harry was just as angry, though he was much better at burying it behind furious chewing. Ron just shook his head in disdain.

It only got worse when they showed up at Potions only to be met with a gaggle of Slytherins lying in wait.

“There they are, there they are!” Pansy said cheerfully, breaking through the group so she could face them all directly. She had a vicious look on her face that made Regulus nervous. “You might find something to interest you in there, Granger!” Pansy snarked as she tossed a copy of *Witch Weekly* directly at Hermione’s face.

Hermione caught it deftly, before stomping into the classroom, rolling her eyes at Pansy's antics. Regulus just barely caught the look of vexed disappointment on Pansy's face. Hermione rifled through the magazine quickly once they were sitting at their usual tables, Regulus next to Harry and Hermione next to Ron.

"I told you not to annoy Rita Skeeter! She's made you out to be some kind of —" Ron hissed.

"What's it say?" Harry whispered. Ron grabbed the magazine out of Hermione's hands and tossed it to them.

"It's just a pile of old rubbish," Hermione said derisively.

"Harry Potter's Secret Heartache?" Harry read incredulously. Snape had already begun writing the ingredients for today's potion on the board, so Harry and Regulus pulled the magazine below their desk to read it.

The article was ridiculous. It was mostly just Rita positing that Hermione might have secret romances going on with Viktor Krum, "Bulgarian Seeker and hero of the last World Quidditch Cup," — which Regulus found to be a bit generous all things considered — Harry Potter, and Regulus himself, who Rita described as "the mysterious heir to the House of Black."

"This really is a pile of old rubbish," Regulus agreed, tutting quietly. Pansy was quoted in the article, describing Hermione as "really ugly" and guessing that she was probably using Love Potions that she brewed herself to get all these boys interested in her.

Hermione and Ron kept whispering as class began, though Regulus couldn't hear them very well. Something about how Rita had known that Krum had asked Hermione to visit over the summer. Ron's face turned stormy at the mention of Krum, though Hermione seemed to just be confused. They were interrupted by Snape, who quickly corralled all the students back into the lecture while Regulus tucked the magazine into his bag before Snape could see it.

Snape was giving Harry a very dirty look throughout the beginning of class and Regulus was seconds away from intervening when there was a knock at the classroom door.

"Enter," Snape said in a bored tone. Karkaroff came storming in and immediately demanded to speak to Snape. Snape tried to shoo him off, telling him that they would talk after class, but Karkaroff was persistent.

"I want to talk now, while you can't sneak off, Severus. You've been avoiding me."

"After the lesson," Snape snapped, but Karkaroff stayed in the classroom during the entire period, hovering near the front of the classroom and watching the proceedings with his beady eyes. Regulus could already see the determined look on Harry's face and didn't even want to know what he might have had planned.

"You go," Regulus hissed. "I'll stay and listen." Harry gave him a curious look but ultimately nodded. When the other students left, Regulus ducked behind his table, scattering a few of his

belongings so that he could pretend to pick them up while he listened.

“What’s so urgent?” Snape hissed.

“This,” Karkaroff responded in the same tone and ripped up his left-hand sleeve to show Snape his forearm. Regulus didn’t have to see it to know what it was. Karkaroff was showing Snape his Dark Mark.

“Put it away!” Snape snarled.

“But you must have noticed —” Karkaroff started to say, his voice agitated.

“We can talk later,” Snape said sharply. “Black! What are you doing?”

“Just packing up my belongings,” Regulus said blandly. Karkaroff looked at him for a moment, his face a swirl of anger, worry, and suspicion, before stomping out of the classroom leaving Snape and Regulus alone. “It’s his Mark, isn’t it?” Regulus asked, walking up to the front of the classroom.

Snape leaned heavily against his desk, crossing his arms over his chest, his face riddled with tension. “He’s growing more powerful,” Snape said quietly. “Karkaroff wants to run.”

“He probably should,” Regulus said. “If he rises again —” He stopped to clear his throat which was suddenly suspiciously tight. “If he rises again, Karkaroff will be hunted down.”

Snape nodded and they both knew what Regulus wasn’t saying. Snape would be in the exact same boat. Regulus wanted to ask what Snape’s plan was, but he could see the rigidity there and decided to show mercy, at least for now. If the Dark Lord rises, they could all end up dead.

“Why were you looking at Harry like that during class?” Regulus asked, deciding to change the subject.

Snape’s face twisted into an ugly snarl. “I know he and his friends are stealing ingredients. You’re probably helping them,” Snape accused sharply.

“What are you talking about?” Regulus asked, throwing his hands out in confusion.

“Boomslang skin. Gillyweed. Lacewing flies,” Snape listed.

“Oh, yes, the Gillyweed was us,” Regulus said with a slight nod. He didn’t realize that Dobby stole it from Snape’s stores, though he supposed that made sense. Snape was clearly working hard to cover up his shock at Regulus’s admittance. “I’ll replace it. Harry didn’t do it on purpose.”

Snape’s lip curled angrily, but he seemed to be wrestling with his desire to blame Harry regardless. “And the Boomslang skin? The Lacewing flies? We both know what potion that’s used for,” Snape said, unwilling to back down completely.

“Both of those are missing?” Regulus asked. Snape nodded his head once. “Someone is stealing ingredients to make Polyjuice Potion?”

“Not someone,” Snape snapped.

“It’s not us,” Regulus said. “I would just buy the ingredients. That’s what I did last time.”

“Last — last time?!” Snape yelled. Regulus waved him off.

“Don’t worry about it,” Regulus said calmly, unbothered by Snape’s agitation. “Who else do you think it could be? Do you think someone is using Polyjuice in the castle?”

“I already know —”

“It’s not us, Snape,” Regulus repeated firmly. “Try to think past your own biases for a second. Who else would need Polyjuice?” Snape glared at him for a long few seconds before looking away, his eyebrow twitching thoughtfully.

“It’s probably an adult or a sixth or seventh year,” Snape said. “I don’t think many of my students could brew it successfully otherwise. Longbottom may be able to figure it out. Granger might be able to as well, but you say it isn’t you.” Snape gave him a suspicious look but Regulus just raised his eyebrows in waiting. “To what purpose, I don’t know.”

Harry ambushed him with questions about what Karkaroff wanted from Snape the moment he left the classroom. Regulus explained in as simple of terms as he could.

“They were both Death Eaters, they still have physical ties to You-Know-Who,” Regulus said, already regretting what he was about to say. “They can tell that he’s growing stronger.”

Harry’s face paled. “They can feel that?” Harry asked.

“Do you know what the Dark Mark is?” Harry shook his head. “It’s a brand that You-Know-Who gives his followers, it’s the same symbol you saw at the Quidditch World Cup, the snake and the skull. Death Eaters have it on their left forearms. You-Know-Who could use it to summon his followers and they could use it to call him as well. It had faded after he was destroyed, but it’s been growing darker. Karkaroff is getting nervous.”

Harry looked for a moment like he might be sick, but Regulus reached up to wrap an arm around his shoulders. He was trying to ground him, that Harry was at Hogwarts, safe with Regulus.

“Don’t worry about this, okay? I just want you to know about it, but it’s not something you need to focus on,” Regulus said quietly. Harry nodded, a small bit of relief crossing his face.

The conversation with Snape about the Polyjuice Potion tugged at him for the entire evening and most of the following day. He couldn’t help watching other students and professors suspiciously as he walked to Hogsmeade with Harry, Ron, and Luna. Hermione and Neville walked behind them several paces, deep in a conversation about Herbology that Regulus found painfully boring. Even overhearing it was putting him to sleep.

He had Harry's invisibility cloak tucked into his robes, already planning to slip off the moment he could. Harry had complained most of the morning about his desire to go with him.

"It's better if you're seen in Hogsmeade, less suspicious that way," Regulus said. "We don't want to risk Sirius's location."

Harry sighed, Regulus already knew that argument was the killing blow. "Yes, fine. Tell him I said hi."

"You can talk to him in the mirror tonight," Regulus said, squeezing Harry's shoulder as they walked. "But I'll tell him."

"Oh, will you give him this?" Luna asked, handing Regulus a small bag.

"Er, sure, Luna," Regulus said. "What is it?"

"It's a Ranglehorn Snout," Luna whispered. "It'll help keep him hidden."

"Oh," Regulus said raising his eyebrows slightly. "Thanks, Luna. That's very thoughtful." Luna smiled brightly at him while he and Harry shared a small look.

He left them a few blocks away from the Three Broomsticks, throwing on the cloak and making his way up to the cave. It was not a terribly long walk, but Regulus was out of breath by the time he got there.

"I don't see why you have to go alone?" Sirius's voice could be heard a few paces from the entrance to the cave.

"You probably shouldn't talk so loudly if you don't want to be found," Regulus said as he entered, pulling the cloak off. "Or at least cast a silencing charm."

"Right," Lupin said, pulling out his wand to do exactly that. Both men were sitting on opposite sides of a dying fire, about as far away from each other as they could get in the small space.

"So, Lupin, are you going somewhere?" Regulus prompted, sitting down and crossing his legs under himself. Sirius looked disgruntled and glanced away from both of them as Lupin began to speak.

"I've researching different artifacts tied to the founders of Hogwarts," Lupin said, Regulus nodded along in understanding. "We know about Hufflepuff's cup and Slytherin's locket. For Gryffindor, the only thing I could find was the sword which Dumbledore already has and confirmed is definitely not a Horcrux."

"That leaves Ravenclaw," Regulus said.

"Exactly. The only thing I could find with any substance was the Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw. Have you heard of it?"

“I don’t think so,” Regulus answered.

“It’s a piece of legend, apparently it was supposed to enhance the wisdom of whoever was wearing it. It was created by Rowena Ravenclaw, but her daughter, Helena, stole it. So the story goes that Helena ran away with the diadem and Rowena sent the Bloody Baron after her to bring her home.”

“The ghost of Slytherin house?”

“Yeah, did you know that he used to be in love with Helena?” Lupin asked, clearly lost in his story.

“No, I usually tried to avoid him, if I’m honest,” Regulus said with a small laugh.

“Understandable,” Lupin agreed. “Well, he tracked Helena to a forest in Albania where she hid the diadem in a hollow tree, or so they say. Helen refused to come back with him so he killed her, then himself in remorse.”

“Morbid,” Sirius muttered. Lupin gave him a small look that Regulus didn't understand.

“The diadem was never found,” Lupin said, “but people have been looking for it for hundreds of years.”

“It’s perfect,” Regulus said. “This is exactly the type of item he would go after.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Lupin said. “I asked Dumbledore about it. He said I could try talking to Helena herself, but her ghost is really shy and I wasn’t able to find her. But apparently, Dumbledore thinks that Voldemort was hiding in that exact forest in Albania a few years ago. It’s where Quirrell met him on his year sabbatical.”

“Of course,” Regulus breathed. “It all makes sense.”

“I’ve decided to start there. He might not have hidden the Horcrux, but if I can track where he found it originally, maybe I can figure out where it is now.”

“And what if Voldemort is still there?” Sirius yelled. Regulus jumped slightly at the noise, but Lupin just looked tired as if they had been having this conversation all morning. They probably had.

“Dumbledore doesn't think he is,” Lupin said calmly. “And I’ll be careful.”

“You could die out there and no one would know where you were,” Sirius said frantically. “I would have no idea how to find you. I wouldn’t even know you were dead.”

“Sirius,” Lupin said quietly.

“Why don’t you just go with him?” Regulus asked. Sirius looked at Regulus with a face so full of betrayal that Regulus outwardly cringed.

“I can’t,” Sirius said. “I have to be here. Harry —”

“Harry is fine,” Regulus said. “I can keep him safe.”

“Oh, are you planning to do that before or after you drown in the Black Lake?” Sirius snapped. Regulus flinched, though he didn’t argue.

“Sirius, please,” Lupin begged.

“No, clearly I’m needed here,” Sirius replied, his cheek twitching with stress.

“You won’t be able to come to the school while Moody has the map,” Regulus said.

“Then steal it back,” Sirius yelled, throwing his hands up in frustration. “This is ridiculous. He shouldn’t be able to just take it.”

“Didn’t you guys lose it to Filch in your seventh year?” Regulus replied.

“Yes, well, that’s different,” Sirius said, his face bright red.

“I promise to be careful, I won’t take any unnecessary risks,” Lupin said, looking imploringly at Sirius. “I’ll be back before the third task whether or not I find anything.”

“You can’t just disappear,” Sirius said softly. Regulus looked away, suddenly feeling like he was intruding. “I can’t do that again. Please.”

“I promise,” Lupin said just as softly. “I’ll come back and I’ll keep you updated the entire time.”

Sirius was quiet for a long time. “Okay,” he finally agreed. “Regulus, you need to get that map back. I want to be there for the third task.”

“I’ll try,” Regulus said.

Chapter End Notes

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the insider.

With everything that had been going on with the Triwizard Tournament and finding the Horcruxes, it felt like classes and life at Hogwarts had fallen by the wayside. Regulus felt like he desperately needed to catch up. It would be humiliating to do poorly in classes he'd already taken and done well in.

Regardless, everything felt so chaotic. The articles from Rita had caused Hermione to receive an unreasonable amount of hate mail for weeks. The first time it happened everyone was confused as Hermione opened one of the numerous letters she had received.

"They're all like this," Hermione said frantically, showing one letter in front of Regulus's eyes.

You are a WickEd giRL. HarRy PotTER desErves BeTteR. GO back wherE you cAME from mUGgle.

"I don't think you should —" Regulus started to say, but it was too late. Hermione opened the next letter and suddenly a foul green liquid was spilling out on her hands.

"Undiluted bubotuber pus!" Ron said.

"*Evanesco*," Regulus said quickly, vanishing the liquid. It was too late though, Hermione's fingers already starting to grow painful sores. "You better go to the Hospital Wing. Don't open any more letters."

Hermione nodded quickly, her eyes tearing up slightly from the pain as she stood to leave the Great Hall. Regulus gave Ron a pointed look and Ron jolted slightly before getting up to follow her. After that Regulus took to vanishing any letters that Hermione received, regardless of who they were from.

Remus was gone now, checked out of the Three Broomsticks and off to Albania. Sirius was calling on the mirror nearly every night to talk to either Harry or Regulus or both. Regulus empathized with his worry and loneliness, but his constant calls were starting to drive Regulus a little crazy.

One night he was about a second away from telling Sirius that it was *late* and that he couldn't keep Harry up all night chatting just because he didn't have anyone to talk to when James stepped in. Regulus had been in bed already when he heard Sirius's voice from the mirror. Harry still hadn't managed a solid silencing charm yet, so Regulus had taken to casting one the moment he heard a voice.

Regulus sat up in bed, irritated and tired, about to pull open his curtains and intervene, when James appeared at the end of his bed.

"Let them be," James said softly, his voice pleading. "Please."

Regulus sighed. "Harry has school," Regulus said, though it was weak. He had never been able to say no to James, especially when he begged like that.

"I know, but Sirius might go crazy if he doesn't have someone to talk to," James said imploringly.

Regulus gave him a look but paused before replying. "Can you see him?" Regulus asked.

James tilted his head to one side and then the other. "Sort of," James explained. "It's not like I can see you, you're very easy to find, but when I really look for him, I can see Sirius sometimes."

"I wonder why," Regulus said, leaning back onto his pillows, his muscles ached from the day and it was making him sleepy.

"I've been thinking about that actually," James said. He leaned back as well onto the opposite side of the bed, moving so that their legs were tangled together slightly. James always seemed to move so that he was touching Regulus, no matter how small the touch might be. "I think it might be because Sirius and I were so close."

"Then why not just show up for him? Why do you hang around me so often?" Regulus asked, his voice light and quietly sarcastic. He was genuinely curious, though he worried that James's answer might hurt him.

James, to Regulus's surprise, blushed. He looked away slightly, his eyes narrowing as if in embarrassment. "You know why," James mumbled. His lips twitched like they couldn't decide whether he should smile or frown.

Regulus gave him a bewildered look because he was certain he didn't know why. "What?"

"Don't make me say it out loud," James pleaded. Regulus would give anything to know what James didn't want to say, but, of course, he could never say no to the man.

"Can you see Remus?" Regulus said, changing the subject. James seemed to visibly relax, though his eyebrows furrowed.

"No, I can't," James said. "Not by himself anyway. I don't know why though. I can't see Harry either unless he's with you."

"Well, you didn't actually know Harry very well," Regulus said, instantly flinching after he said the words. "Sorry, that came out wrong. I know you knew him, but he was only a baby, right? He's a person now. Or he was always a person, I just mean —"

Regulus was cut off by James's loud laughter.

"I know what you mean," he said with a chuckle. "Don't worry, I'm not offended. You're right, I don't really know him like I know you and Sirius."

"I wish you did," Regulus said softly. "You would like him."

“I know I would,” James said, giving Regulus a very tender look.

Regulus didn't try to intervene between Sirius and Harry again, even after Harry woke up late for breakfast, rubbing his tired eyes and yawning all through the morning. He still felt so protective over him that he often forgot that he had to give Harry space to make his own mistakes, even if they were little ones like staying up too late chatting with your godfather.

Regulus talked to Sirius about twice a week, though their conversations were much shorter than the ones Sirius had with Harry. Mostly they talked about possibilities for the last task and worries about who might be in the castle with them. Occasionally, they talked about school which Regulus found hilarious. Never once had the two of them talked about school before.

School itself was becoming quite a nuisance actually. His classes were ramping up for the end of the year and Regulus was suddenly swamped in busy work. The classes he'd taken before weren't as difficult to keep up with, but there was still the oddity that came with different professors.

Transfiguration and Charms were the easiest. He had done well in them the first time around and he still had the same teachers for the subjects, so there wasn't too much change. Unlike his first few years at Hogwarts, he wasn't holding back as much in classes, trying to disguise his older magic. Usually, he just pattered around until someone else successfully cast the spell, usually Hermione though not always, and then he would cast it as well. This had the added benefit of keeping him from being assigned extra classwork like the students who failed to cast the spells on the first try.

Potions and History of Magic were slightly more complicated. History of Magic had always been boring and while Regulus did a passable job the first time around, he had almost instantly forgotten everything he learned before and he just didn't have the drive to relearn it. Hermione seemed to be the only one who ever bothered to pay attention, he had no idea how any of the other students were even passing the class.

Potions, as well, had never been his best subject, though he did well enough. However, with Snape as a teacher, the class periods were always all over the place as far as quality went. Sometimes Snape seemed extremely invested in teaching them, walking around the class and giving feedback. Other times, he seemed to forget that he had other students beyond Neville, whom he had quickly begun focusing all his attention on.

On those days, there would be far more explosions than normal, usually coming from Seamus's or Theo's cauldron. Regulus had no idea what Theo was like or what he kept trying to make in his cauldron, but it almost always ended badly. Hermione would always be in a bad mood after those classes as well, frustrated that Neville was getting any attention in the subject — even though most of the attention was largely negative, or at least extremely intense.

“Hermione, you don't even need the attention. You always brew the potions perfect the first time,” Ron would say as they left the class. They had this conversation basically every other week.

“Yes, well,” Hermione would reply, turning up her nose in annoyance, “Professor Snape could at least acknowledge that.”

“Right, 'cause he’s always been known for his positive reinforcement,” Regulus would reply making Harry and Ron chuckle. Hermione would just roll her eyes, though he could see an unwilling smile tugging at her lips.

Neville would stay late most class periods, along with Seamus and Theo who were often forced to stay behind in order to clean up their mess. It didn’t matter anymore which one of them caused it, Snape would just assume they were both at fault and make them both stay.

“That Theo kid is so weird,” Regulus overheard Dean say once or twice. Regulus privately thought that Dean was just worried that Theo’s antics were going to entice his best friend away.

Seamus and Dean had been attached at the hip since first year and even now they seemed to only talk to each other. They reminded Regulus a bit of James and Sirius in the early years, never one without the other. Both of them had perfected the look that kids got when they were sure, at any given moment, that they were about to get in trouble. James and Sirius wore that expression so often in their first few years at Hogwarts that Regulus almost forgot what they looked like normally.

Herbology was just as tedious as it was the first time around. Regulus did not like dirt and he hated the strong smells that came along with spending time in the Greenhouses. If he never had to smell dragon dung fertilizer ever again, it would be far too soon. James found his suffering hilarious because he was a cruel, cruel man. Almost every time Regulus left the class, James would appear, a mocking smirk on his face.

“Little lordling pureblood can’t handle a bit of mud?” James would say before laughing obnoxiously loud.

“You were a little lordling pureblood yourself, if you don’t recall,” Regulus would reply petulantly.

“Yes, but my parents let me play in the dirt,” James would say, knocking Regulus with his shoulder.

“No decorum,” Regulus would mutter. James would laugh and laugh.

Care of Magical Creatures was much the same as Herbology. A little boring and very gross. The Blast-Ended Skrewts were almost all dead by the time April rolled around, but the ones that survived were massive and disgusting. Regulus would show up to class after giving Ron, Hermione, and Harry a very long lecture about the importance of not listening to Hagrid when he claimed that something was safe.

All three of them would nod along and then inevitably ignore him once they got to class and Hagrid would request assistance. It wasn’t too bad in the off classes where they encountered normal animals, like the one where Hagrid brought out a bunch of nifflers, but the skrewts were highly dangerous.

“No, let him handle it himself,” Regulus would snap at them. Ron was the only one who listened most of the time, though even he would get wrapped up in helping Hagrid deal with the monstrous beasts.

The Slytherins were the only ones in the class that seemed to have any critical thought. All of them would hover several yards away, watching with bored expressions as half the Gryffindors tried to take care of the giant animals. Only once did a skrewt make a run at the group, but something about the hoard of Slytherins scared the beast off at the last second.

Regulus did not understand it, but he noticed Draco step back from the group as if not to draw attention himself, his face pale and unnaturally sharp.

Draco himself had become quite the irritant in Regulus’s life. After the events of the first two tasks, Draco seemed to be unreasonably focused on what Harry would be asked to do in the final event.

“I have already told you a million times,” Regulus would say, fully exasperated by the pointy blonde’s constant pestering, “he’s not going to do anything. The second task was a fluke, but he is going avoid the danger altogether for the third one.”

“And you’re sure? Do you know what the task is yet?” Draco would say as if he hadn’t just asked that exact question.

“Why don’t you ask your father if he knows?” Regulus finally suggested one time. “He always has insider knowledge, maybe he can tell you what the task is.” Draco pursed his lips unhappily but didn’t argue.

Honestly, Regulus had no idea how Draco kept finding him alone. Regulus was rarely alone these days, but it was like Draco could sense the moment he was isolated and he would choose that moment to strike. It was doing Regulus's head in. Draco’s worry was one thing, but his complete inability to admit that he cared about what happened to Harry was even worse. He was adamant that he hated Harry and that that was all he felt, even though anyone with eyes could tell that wasn’t true.

None of the Gryffindors seemed to notice that Draco was always sneaking around trying to talk to Regulus, or at least, they never said anything about it. The only two who seemed to pick up on it were Luna and Pansy. Luna was unbothered; if she was even curious about what Draco was saying, she never acted on it.

“I think he’s fragile,” Luna privately told him once. “He’s working very hard not to show it though, isn’t it?”

She had hit the nail right on the head, Regulus thought. Regulus didn’t know Lucius exceptionally well during his first life, but what he did know about him, did not reflect well on the man. He was stiff and angry, he thirsted for power in a way that few Slytherins ever actually matched up to. Mostly he was unyielding, cruel when he needed to be, conniving, and ruthless most days.

Narcissa was the same. She was understated about it, but she and Lucius aligned perfectly in attitude and behavior. How they had raised a son like Draco, who flittered around the castle obsessing over a boy and the possible danger he might face, Regulus had no idea. Perhaps Lucius and Narcissa had coddled him a bit too much. Then again, his own parents were cruel and ruthless in their own right, even more so than the Malfoys, and Regulus had dedicated his second life to keeping his ex-boyfriend's son safe and happy. Perhaps empathy skipped a generation.

Pansy, on the other hand, never spoke to Regulus, though she watched him with a curious glint in her eyes. After the Yule Ball, Pansy loudly announced to anyone who would listen that Draco was now her *boyfriend* and that everyone needed to back off and leave him alone. Draco seemed at best bored by this announcement, and at worst, he seemed outright irritated and embarrassed by it. Still, he didn't disagree with her, allowing her to tell everyone.

Regulus thought this might be the reason she was so aware of where Draco was at any given time. Anytime Draco would find and ambush Regulus, Pansy wouldn't be far behind, showing up ten or twenty minutes after Draco left, just so she could pretend to be doing something else while watching Regulus out of the corner of her eye. Regulus wasn't sure what to make of it.

Lavender and Parvati seemed to think it was because Pansy actually had a crush on Regulus and not Draco.

"She's always watching you, it's obvious that she likes you," Lavender said one night before letting out a only slightly mean cackle.

"I hate to say it, but I agree," Parvati added solemnly. "It makes perfect sense."

"I'm not interested in her," Regulus replied as magnanimously as possible.

"Good," Lavender said, her voice a little too sharp. "She's only interested in you because she wants to marry into the Black family."

"Lav," Parvati chastised.

"What? It's true," Lavender said but looked abashed.

"You're probably right," Regulus said. "Though the Malfoy family is not that different."

"True," Parvati agreed.

Despite that short conversation, which Regulus felt settled the matter quite well, Lavender and Parvati would bring up the prospect of Pansy's crush on Regulus every few times he talked to them. There was never much else to add to it, but they seemed to enjoy rehashing their opinions on the topic often.

Lavender had also started giving Regulus more and more romance novels now that he was actually reading them. She would slide him one with a hungry smile and after Regulus

finished reading them, she would pounce, instantly asking him in-depth questions about the characters and the story, desperate to know exactly what Regulus thought.

It reminded Regulus a bit of how Hermione would talk about certain school subjects or S.P.E.W.; if anyone brought up a topic that Hermione loved, she would smile like a shark about to devour a giant fish before jumping into the subject like she was being paid to lecture about it. Regulus thought that Lavender and Hermione would probably get along better if they could find just one subject that they agreed on.

Instead, Hermione was highly judgmental of Regulus's friendship with Lavender and Parvati. She thought they were vapid and dumb, though she never said that much out loud. Regulus knew it just came from a place of insecurity so he never let it get to him. It reminded him of how he felt about Sirius and all his friends, he could never touch them, could never fit in with their happy friend group, so resigned himself to calling them idiots and hating them.

Regulus thought Hermione's feelings were made worse by the fact that the girls were very interested in Ron's divination abilities. Ginny was just as horrified by his friendship with them. Regulus didn't know Ginny very well, but that didn't seem to stop her from having very strong opinions about who he should and should not spend time with.

Divination, in fact, had turned into the Ron Weasley show. Trelawney would only teach for about twenty minutes before coming over to Ron and checking on his progress. Regulus barely paid attention to it, he was just glad that Trelawney had laid off on giving death predictions to Harry. He was pretty sure his hair was going to turn prematurely gray if he had to hear even one more of them.

Luna was not in Divination, though she was clearly very interested in the subject. Most evenings, she would find her way into the common room and ask Ron searching questions about what they were learning.

"Why didn't you take Divination yourself?" Hermione asked one night. Her voice always grew sharp when this particular topic came up.

"Oh, I'm not allowed," Luna said simply and then refused to elaborate.

Astronomy and Muggle Studies ended up being Regulus's favorite classes, though he was pretty sure no one knew that except James. Astronomy had always been a strong course for him given how obsessed with the subject his family was, but he found peace in studying the sky. He loved being in the Astronomy tower, often lingering there long after class was dismissed. James would always find him once he was alone.

"Sometimes I forget how beautiful it is up here," James would say nearly every time, always looking on in awe like it was his first time seeing it.

"I know," Regulus would reply because what else was there to do other than agree? It was one of the most peaceful places in Hogwarts. Although James always had to ruin that peace, at least a little bit, it was just his way.

“How many people do you think have lost their virginity up here?” James would ask, a smirk in his words.

Regulus, never one to be out-manuevered, would reply with something even more annoying. Something like, “I bet Snape lost his virginity up here.”

James would groan, throwing his hands over his face in disgust, and Regulus would cackle meanly.

“Why would you put that image in my head?”

“What? You don’t like picturing Snape naked?”

“No! Of course not, no one wants to picture that!” James would say, before pointing a finger at Regulus accusatorially and saying, “And you better not be either.” Regulus would laugh so hard that he struggled to draw breath.

It was a nice little routine for them. Every time the dance was a little different, but it always ended the same, both of them leaning against one another in quiet observation of the stars watching down on them.

Muggle Studies was the only class that Regulus did not have any friends in. There were so few students taking it that they were all combined into one and it was mostly made up of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. He was the only Gryffindor and, of course, there were no Slytherins. Regulus, however, loved it.

It was probably the only class that actually challenged him. He suspected that this might be in part because Professor Burbage, while obsessed with muggles, was not actually that knowledgeable about them. Hermione was his only other source on muggles, but she often gave him corrections to what Burbage taught.

They were learning about muggle planes. At first, Regulus thought the woman was outright lying to them. There was no way that muggles had developed trains that could fly (Burbage’s words, not his), but apparently, it was true. Hermione had even been on one, which Regulus was equal parts fascinated and disturbed by.

“I can’t believe that you’re so interested in this,” James said one afternoon. Regulus had just left class and was walking in a mostly empty area of the castle as he worked his way back toward Gryffindor Tower. He had already pulled out his notes from class and was looking them over.

“Muggles are so inventive,” Regulus said with awe. “Wizards would never come up with something like this.”

“We don’t really need to though, do we?” James said, looking at his notes curiously like he was trying to parse out everything Regulus had written.

“I don’t know, international portkeys are such a pain, this might be better,” Regulus responded. James laughed quietly.

“It seems dangerous,” James said, sounding a bit uncertain.

“Hermione says cars are actually more dangerous than planes now, though Burbage said that thousands of muggles died while they were inventing planes. I don’t know if that’s true or not,” Regulus said. “Did Lily ever go in a plane?”

James’s eyebrows raised slightly. “I don’t think so,” James said with a tiny frown. “I never got the chance to ask.”

“Sorry,” Regulus said softly. He stopped walking so he could James in the eye. “Do you — do you ever see her?”

James shook his head. “I don’t know where she is,” James said quietly. “Where it is, I hope she’s okay.” Regulus watched him for a long few seconds.

“She’s probably with Harry, we just can’t see her,” Regulus said. James smiled, though his eyes watered slightly.

“Yeah,” James said. “Yeah, I reckon she is.” He was quiet as they started walking again, but after a few moments, he said, “Or with Sirius. I always suspected that she liked him more than me.”

Regulus couldn’t help the loud laugh he let out.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was the most stressful class in Regulus’s schedule. While Moody had calmed down some in regards to the way he was teaching, he was still unsettling. Regulus never went into class without ensuring his Occlumency walls were up. He didn’t know if Moody was any good at Legilimency, but he never wanted to risk it. He told Harry never to look the man in the eye just in case.

There was also the fact that Moody had taken to calling on Regulus in every single class period. It didn’t matter if it was to answer questions or to demonstrate some spell, Moody would always call on Regulus first. It was the only class where Regulus was extremely careful about his performance. He always made sure that he struggled with the spell a little bit. He didn’t care if it affected his grade as long as it kept Moody from being more suspicious than he already was.

Regulus kept trying to figure out Moody’s schedule, he knew he needed to steal the map back, but Moody was erratic and it wasn’t like Regulus could sneak up on him wearing the cloak given that Moody could see through it.

Near the end of April, Regulus was once again watching Moody. He was sitting in one of the alcoves near the Defense classroom pretending to read.

“*Regulus*,” a voice hissed. Regulus looked around. “Over here.” Regulus finally noticed a large rug that was hung on the wall moving slightly. He walked up to it and pulled it aside to find a secret alcove he had never seen before. Draco was inside, looking sweaty and manic.

“What?”

“Get in,” Draco hissed, grabbing Regulus by the cloak and dragging him behind the rug.

“What’s going on?” Regulus asked. Draco didn’t usually insist on such secrecy. Sure, he only approached Regulus when he was alone, but he would usually just walk up to wherever Regulus was.

“I figured out the task,” Draco said triumphantly. His face twitched oddly, Regulus thought he was trying to give a smug smile, but he mostly looked pleased.

“You did? How?” Regulus asked.

“My father told me,” Draco said. Regulus had not been serious about Draco asking his father, but he couldn’t deny that he was happy he did.

“Okay, what is it then?”

“It’s a labyrinth!” Draco shouted before covering his mouth and then speaking in a much quieter voice. “It’s a maze. There will be a bunch of enchantments and creatures that they’ll have to get by.”

“A maze,” Regulus breathed. He was trying to process everything that Draco had said, but Draco went on talking.

“I don’t know all of them, but I know there is going to be a boggart, an acromantula, and I think a sphinx,” Draco said. He was speaking so quickly that his words blended together. “My father said Hagrid is donating the creatures, so I bet he’ll add one of those terrible skrewts he made.”

“Yeah, I bet he will,” Regulus said faintly, feeling dazed. Draco’s smile widened even further. “This is — this is very helpful, Draco. You have no idea.”

Draco smiled proudly and then moved his shoulders around in a way that reminded Regulus distinctly of a bird preening. Draco was clearly trying to tamp down it and stop himself from doing it, but Regulus noticed it anyway. Suddenly, his smile fell and he looked deadly serious.

“Do *not* tell Potter I told you this,” Draco said. “And — and — and if he wins then I’ll make sure everyone knows you were cheating.”

Regulus threw his hands up in surrender, doing his very best not to laugh. “Of course, I’m trying to keep him alive.”

Draco nodded seriously, then swept out of the alcove and was gone.

the pensieve.

Chapter Notes

cw: there are a lot of mentions of vomiting in this chapter

Regulus immediately began preparing for the final task right after Draco told him about it. He made a list of all the creatures he could think of, the ones Draco had mentioned and any others that might be relevant, and started making a plan on how Harry could avoid, escape, or in desperate times, defeat each of them. Harry watched over his shoulder through most of the research, absorbing the information in a way he rarely did. Defense Against the Dark Arts was easily Harry's best subject, and he seemed to crave for more knowledge.

One afternoon, Harry was pulled away to go talk to Bagman about the next task. Harry threw him a smug smirk as he left, clearly, he felt good being ahead of the curve. Harry barely even questioned where Regulus had learned about the task, too excited to know things before the other champions. At first he wanted to share, at least with Cedric, what they knew, but Regulus convinced him not to. They didn't want people asking too many questions.

They had to have several conversations about Harry not actually participating in the task. Even though Regulus was providing him with as much preparation as he could muster, that didn't mean that Harry should hurry through the maze and try to win. His only task was to stay alive.

"Are there any more creatures that still need researching?" Hermione asked as she, Ron, and Regulus settled down in the common room.

"Well, I'm not really sure how to research the skrewts since Hagrid invented them," Regulus answered.

Hermione hummed, pursing her lips unhappily. "Yes, that does complicate things a bit."

"I guess he could just try to run away," Ron offered.

"True, but they're so fast now," Hermione said. "It would be better if he had some way to defend himself."

"Too bad we can't just go down and fight one of them now," Ron said with a chuckle. "Then at least we would know what to do."

"Somehow I doubt Hagrid would be very happy about that," Regulus said, though he laughed quietly as well.

“Why he’s allowed to keep creatures like that on school grounds doesn’t make any sense to me,” Hermione muttered. Ron and Regulus nodded. They fell silent as each of them began working on their classwork. Ron was trying to read his History of Magic textbook, but within a few minutes, Regulus could already see his eyes drooping sleepily.

Hermione was scribbling on a piece of parchment, copying down the notes she had taken in Ancient Runes so that they were easier to read. Regulus just felt burnt out, though he was trying to work through some of the reading for Charms, regardless of the fact that he already knew the subject.

When Harry came back from his meeting, much later than Regulus expected him to, he busted in through the portrait hole in a flurry of anxious energy.

“Crouch attacked Krum!” he all but shouted. Ron jolted out of his sleep, his snores abruptly cutting off as he nearly fell out of his chair in surprise.

“What?” Hermione asked, her hair had grown in size as she worked from where she had been anxiously pulling at the roots, and now it looked like a lion's mane the way it framed her face.

Harry was breathing heavily, looking distressed and frustrated. “Harry, sit down,” Regulus said. Harry rushed forward to obey. “Tell us what happened.”

“After Bagman told us what the task would be — which they built it on the Quidditch Pitch, did you know they were going to do that?”

“Yes, haven’t you noticed that they’ve been working around there?” Hermione responded. Harry shook his head.

“What happened with Crouch?” Regulus prompted impatiently.

“Right, well Krum asked to talk to me in private, and then Crouch came out of the Forbidden Forest and grabbed onto me. He was crazy, muttering about his son and his wife, something about Bertha Jorkins.”

“Bertha Jorkins?” Regulus asked, his eyebrows raising in surprise. Harry nodded so quickly that it looked like his head would bob right off his neck.

“Yes, the same as in my dream,” Harry said. “Or vision, whatever.” He waved his hand around frantically like he was trying to fend off distractions.

“Then what happened?” Ron asked, his blue eyes were watching Harry hungrily.

“Well, I went up to get Dumbledore since obviously, something was wrong with the man, Krum stayed behind to watch him, but by the time we came back he was gone, and Krum had been stunned. He said that Crouch attacked him.”

“Was Viktor all right?” Hermione asked. Ron rolled his eyes quickly, but Hermione didn’t seem to notice.

“He was fine, just annoyed. But Karkaroff showed up, and then Hagrid attacked him.” Harry had a bead of sweat running down the side of his face, and he brushed it off quickly, flicking the sweat onto the ground.

“Hagrid attacked Karkaroff?” Ron asked, alarmed and perhaps a bit excited.

“Yes, it was honestly scary. I’ve never seen Hagrid act like that,” Harry said, his eyes seeming to widen even further as he said it. Regulus could imagine that seeing Hagrid angry would be terrifying.

“I wonder what happened to Crouch. You said he mentioned his son?” Regulus asked though he wished he didn’t. He did not want to talk about Barty.

“Yes, but I think he was hallucinating, he kept talking to a tree like it was a person,” Harry responded. They fell silent for a moment while each of them took in what Harry had said.

“Maybe Mr. Crouch didn’t attack Viktor,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked. His words were a bit sharp, as they often were when he felt like someone was discounting what he had to say. Hermione didn’t seem to notice, or she at least didn’t react.

“Well, what if someone attacked both of them, but Viktor only thought it was Crouch,” Hermione said.

“But then why would Crouch run off if he wasn’t trying to hide from Dumbledore?” Ron asked.

“I don’t think he ran,” Harry said, furrowing his eyebrows. “He seemed really weak, I mean he could barely walk — I don’t reckon he was up to disappearing or anything.”

“You *can*’t disapparate on the Hogwarts grounds, haven’t I told you enough times?” Hermione said frustratedly. “Honestly, I —”

“There is something else,” Harry interrupted whatever else Hermione was about to say. “He said something about Voldemort.”

“What?” Regulus asked.

“He said that he was getting stronger,” Harry said, his voice seemed to grow dull like what had just happened was finally sinking in.

All four of them were silent for a long moment before Ron said, “Well, you said he was out of mind, he was probably just raving...”

“He was sanest when he was trying to talk about Voldemort,” Harry replied unhappily. “He was having real trouble stringing two words together, but then he seemed to focus. He just kept saying that he needed to warn Dumbledore.”

Harry was on edge most of the following day. They had called Sirius to tell him what happened, and Sirius ended up lecturing Harry for nearly half an hour about the dangers of walking into the forest with random people. Harry was clearly frustrated, but Regulus was secretly glad that Sirius was the one to tell him not to do that.

Regulus didn't think he had ever seen Sirius act so sternly. It was like a flash from another life — one where Sirius never went to Azkaban and actually got the opportunity to raise Harry. Even with the way Sirius was clearly suffering, it was obvious that he cared for Harry fiercely.

At one point during the day, Harry wanted to go talk to Moody about Crouch, apparently Moody had been called to search the forest for the man, but Regulus was not about to let Harry talk to Moody in private.

"If he finds anything, we'll know about it," Regulus said. Harry pouted all through lunch. By the time they went to Divination, Harry was in a strop.

The classroom was unusually warm and muggy that day. The days were beginning to grow warmer as summer approached, though Trelawney never seemed to extinguish her fire. Regulus was barely holding on as he listened to Trelawney's lecturing. He could see that Ron and Harry had already lost their fight, and both of them had their eyes fully closed. Regulus was just debating the merits of sleeping through the rest of class when Harry flung himself onto the floor and began screaming in pain.

Regulus was up and on his feet in a second, taking two long strides toward Harry before kneeling down beside him. He could see the rest of the class gathering around, Trelawney looking openly intrigued, but he ignored them. Harry was rolling back and forth as if he was having a seizure.

"Harry! Harry!" he called, trying to wake Harry out of what was happening. Harry's hand came up quickly and began clawing at the scar on his forehead. The scattered lightning in his skin appeared swollen and irritated. Regulus pulled his hands away, trying to keep Harry from doing any further damage to himself. "*Harry!*" he shouted once more, and Harry's eyes finally shot open.

His eyes were unnaturally bright, the green so vibrant that it seemed to glow. There were tears dancing right on the edge of falling down his cheeks, his mouth pulled into a grimace of pain.

"What was it, Potter?" Trelawney said excitedly. "A premonition? An apparition? What did you see?"

"Nothing," Harry said quickly.

"You were clutching your scar! You were rolling around on the floor, clutching your scar!"

"That's enough," Regulus said sharply. Trelawney looked at him angrily, but Regulus only stared back at her.

“I need to go to the Hospital Wing, I think. Bad headache,” Harry muttered, slowly pulling himself to his feet.

“I’m going with him,” Regulus said, already gathering up his and Harry’s belongings. Ron looked worried, and like he might get up to follow them, Regulus just shook his head. Harry didn’t wait for him before rushing out of the classroom, but he was standing at the top of the stairs when Regulus climbed down the ladder.

“I’m going to see Dumbledore,” Harry said stiffly once Regulus was in front of him, before turning and rushing down the stairs.

“Wait, your scar —”

“I can get a pain potion afterward,” Harry threw over his shoulder. “This is more important.”

“Okay, fine,” Regulus said, rushing after Harry. They arrived at the gargoyle in no time, and Harry immediately started listing every sweet that he could think of.

“Chocolate Frog,” he yelled angrily. “Sugar Quill! Cockroach Cluster!” Finally, the gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside. “Really? I was just joking,” Harry muttered. Once they reached the top of the spiral stone staircase, they could hear loud voices from behind the oak door that led to Dumbledore’s office.

It was Moody, Dumbledore, and the Minister of Magic, Fudge, arguing about both Bertha Jorkins and Barty Crouch’s disappearances. They listened quietly before they heard Moody say, “It’s just that Potter and Black want a word with you, Dumbledore. They’re just outside the door.”

“That’s freaky,” Harry mumbled just as the door opened.

“Hello, Potter,” Moody greeted before his magical eye settled on Regulus. “Black. Come in, then.”

Fudge tried, not very subtly, to question Harry before Dumbledore shooed both him and Moody out of his office.

“I wanted to talk to you, Professor,” Harry said quickly to Dumbledore who nodded once.

“Wait here for me, our examination of the grounds will not take long,” Dumbledore said before leaving Regulus and Harry alone in his office.

Regulus desperately wanted to know what Harry had seen, but he could tell that Harry wasn’t ready to talk about it yet. Nevertheless, he would hear it when Dumbledore came back, and there was no use making Harry tell the story twice. Regulus was looking around the office idly when he heard Harry speak.

“What’s that?” Harry asked. Regulus turned to see what Harry was gesturing at. It was a shallow stone basin that had silvery light dancing and shimmering out of it.

“It’s a Pensieve,” Regulus said. “You can use it to view memories. That’s what those silver things are.” He pointed to the silvery memories swimming along the surface of the water. Harry, without saying another word, bent forward to get a better look and in the time it took Regulus to blink, his head was dipped in, and he was viewing whatever memory Dumbledore had stored there.

Regulus groaned frustratedly. In order to pull Harry out, he would have to enter the Pensieve with him, and he did not want to go in. Regulus always hated Pensieves — not that he had used them that often.

When he and Sirius were very little, his father used to side-along apparate them all over the country. He would tell them that it was shameful to get sick while apparating and that he wouldn’t allow them to go to Hogwarts if they were still sickening up during the process. Regulus never had a problem with it, though he didn’t like the feeling of being squeezed, turned and stretched, he would never vomit. Perhaps he would be a bit sweaty and a little green, but he never actually threw up.

Sirius on the other hand was terrible at it. Regulus had a distinct memory of being six years old, Sirius was seven, and their father apparating them to their aunt’s house. Sirius mumbled something about being fine before he doubled over and threw up all over their father’s shoes. It was a nasty sight and their aunt, who was standing outside her house when they arrived, gasped like it was the most horrifying thing she had ever witnessed.

Regulus felt very smug and happy that he was able to keep ahold of himself. Sirius just glared at him, baring his teeth in that animalistic way he always did as a child. Regulus just scoffed and turned his head away while his father flung a stinging hex at Sirius, admonishing him for getting sick.

Now, looking back on the memory, he could see how awful of a person his father had been. It had seemed normal back then, all the adults in their family reacted that way, but now that he thought about someone doing that to Harry, he wanted to break something in half.

In retaliation for Regulus’s smugness that day, Sirius tricked Regulus into putting his head in his grandfather’s Pensieve. Regulus was very gullible, as many younger children are, and he trusted Sirius. He barely made it halfway through whatever memory he was watching before he had to rip his head out of the water, throwing up all over his nice wizard robes before promptly fainting in the middle of his grandfather’s office.

Sirius had left him there, and Regulus was punished for sneaking into the office without permission. Regulus didn’t use a Pensieve again until he had graduated from Hogwarts. Barty’s father had one in his house, though Barty claimed it had actually been confiscated by some man who was sentenced to life in Azkaban. They used it a few times during their work as Death Eaters, and each time, Regulus had to excuse himself to get sick in the bathroom. It was very improper.

That was why Regulus refused to put his head in the Pensieve in order to pull Harry out. He glanced over the top and saw a memory of a younger Dumbledore floating at the top. Regulus looked away quickly, just the quick swirling moment making him feel motion sickness.

Dumbledore came back only a few minutes later. Regulus looked up at him like a guilty child once he noticed Dumbledore watching Harry with a small frown.

“Sorry,” Regulus said quietly. “He just tipped his head in, I didn’t have time to stop him.” It was a terrible excuse, he should have gotten Harry out when he had the chance.

Dumbledore just waved his hand dismissively. “Ah, it is quite all right. Curiosity is a dangerous thing,” Dumbledore said before tipping his head into the Pensieve alongside Harry. A moment later, they were both back out of the water.

“Professor,” Harry gasped. “I know I shouldn’t’ve.”

“I quite understand,” Dumbledore responded.

“Harry, what was it you saw?” Regulus asked quickly. They were here for a purpose and Regulus was tired of waiting.

“In the Pensieve?” Harry asked, tilting his head to the side.

“In Divination,” Regulus corrected tiredly.

“Right, I — er — I fell asleep in class,” Harry said, blushing lightly while looking abashedly at Dumbledore who had taken a seat behind his desk.

“Very understandable, do go on,” Dumbledore responded evenly, though Regulus could see the light tug of a smile on his lips.

“I had a dream about Voldemort. He was torturing Wormtail — you do know who Wormtail is?”

“I do know. Please continue,” Dumbledore said.

Harry launched back into his explanation. Apparently, he had seen Voldemort receive a letter from an owl that told him that Wormtail’s mistake had been fixed. There was a jumble of other information, mostly that Voldemort had a snake he was thinking of feeding Wormtail too, and that someone was dead.

“Then he cast the Cruciatus Curse on Wormtail, and my scar hurt,” Harry said. “It woke me up, it hurt so badly.”

Regulus tuned out their conversation. He wondered who the Dark Lord had killed, but his thoughts kept drifting to Crouch Sr., Harry had been right there, what if someone had been after him? Could they have gotten through the forest? He would have to contact Sirius, see if he could move closer without being spotted on the map. Maybe he could search the forest, try and track down any unknown scents.

“You know the trial where you found me? The one with Crouch’s son?” Harry said, gesturing toward the Pensieve. Regulus shook himself out of his thoughts. “They were talking about Neville’s parents?”

Dumbledore's face was grim. "Has Neville mentioned to you why he was brought up by his grandmother?" Harry shook his head.

Regulus's stomach twisted at the mention of Neville's parents. He had read about their attack in the weeks of research he did after he first came back to life. He knew that Barty had been involved, and he knew that he died in prison, but he didn't like to think about it. It was like a broken bone, as long as he didn't bother it, he never felt the pain.

"Frank and his wife were tortured for information about Voldemort's whereabouts after he disappeared. The Death Eaters were very desperate to find him, many refused to believe that he was really gone. They thought that the Aurors were hiding him."

"So they're dead?" Harry asked quietly, his face very pale.

"No, the effects of the Cruciatus Curse are long-lasting and very damaging. It can destroy the nerves and the mind. They are both still in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries."

"Oh," Harry said before swallowing harshly. He looked horror-struck, and Regulus felt the same. He hated to think of Barty there watching a poor couple get tortured into insanity.

"The Ministry was under great pressure to catch those who had done it. However, the evidence was unreliable given their condition," Dumbledore said bitterly.

"So, Mr. Crouch's son might not have been involved?" Harry said slowly. Regulus thought he might pass out for a long second, gripping the back of the chair that sat across from Dumbledore. "His own father threw him in prison?"

Barty could have been innocent? Though he was guilty of many other things that happened during the war. But he could have been innocent of the crime he was convicted of? The thought made Regulus feel dizzy.

"Not unusual behavior for someone like him," Regulus spat before he could stop himself. Both Dumbledore and Harry looked at him with surprise.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked curiously.

"He's the one that put Sirius away without a trial," Regulus said. "He was gunning for Minister of Magic."

Harry's mouth hung open in shock.

"Mr. Crouch is —" Dumbledore said, looking far away in a terrible memory. "He is a complicated man."

"That's generous," Regulus muttered.

"What happened to Crouch's son?" Harry asked.

"He died," Regulus said. "In Azkaban."

“Oh,” Harry replied, though he looked thoughtful and a bit confused. They left Dumbledore’s office not long after.

Dumbledore gave them a last warning, telling Harry, “Please do not speak about Neville’s parents to anyone. He has the right to let people know when he is ready.”

the prodigal son.

Chapter Notes

i wasn't going to update until saturday, but here's a surprise new chapter

The sound in the Great Hall was deafening on the morning of the Third Task. They had prepared as best they could, and it was finally time. Regulus thought he might vibrate out of his skin with the amount of anxiety running through his veins. He was far more anxious than Harry, who seemed calm and unaffected, though Regulus could see a slight tension in his shoulders every few minutes or so.

Harry didn't have to take exams, and Regulus felt he had done about as well as he could have given the many distractions. Regardless, they were over now and could be put out of mind. Technically the other fourth-year Gryffindors still had the History of Magic exam left that morning, but Regulus had been given leave to take his early so that he could spend the day with Harry before the task.

In the meantime, Harry had been practicing a litany of spells, charms, and hexes while preparing for the task. He was probably better trained in Defense than most average seventh-years at this point.

"You remembered the amulet, right?" Regulus asked again for the third time.

"Yes, I have it already," Harry answered with only slight exasperation. He reached beneath his shirt and pulled out the necklace that they had retrieved from the Potter Vault last year. Regulus had mostly forgotten about it until James brought it up a few nights before. Regulus could have kissed him.

The owls arrived only minutes after they sat down to eat. Regulus grabbed his copy of the *Daily Prophet* from his owl, but before he even had a chance to look at it, Hermione had unfolded her copy and spat out a mouthful of pumpkin juice all over it.

"What?" Harry and Ron said at the same time. Regulus watched her spell away the juice, her cheeks flushing.

"Nothing," Hermione said quickly, not looking up even as she shoved the paper aside. Regulus raised an eyebrow before unfolding his own copy.

Harry Potter: "Disturbed and Dangerous" by Rita Skeeter was spread across the entire front page of the newspaper.

"Oh, great," Regulus muttered. He scanned through the article quickly. Rita Skeeter had written all about Harry's fit in Divination a few weeks prior, though Regulus had no idea how

she had known about it. He wondered which one of their fellow students had told her what happened.

“Gone off me a bit, hasn’t she?” Harry said lightly, seemingly unbothered by Rita’s new attempt to slander him in the paper. No teenager should be that unbothered by their public image, Regulus thought.

“Why does it say that she witnessed Harry leaving class?” Regulus pondered. He read through the article again. Draco was quoted in it, revealing the fact that Harry was a Parseltongue to the world. Sometimes Regulus forgot how much of a pain Draco could be when he wasn’t being helpful, weirdly helpful.

“The window was open,” Harry said. “Maybe she heard me.”

“You were at the top of the North Tower!” Hermione yelled. Regulus tuned them out for a moment, thinking over that day in Divination. It was a pivotal moment, but in a way that Regulus couldn’t fully understand.

Since their meeting with Dumbledore, Harry had seemed a bit disconnected. He was very worried about the Dark Lord gaining power, though he didn’t talk to Regulus about it much. Regulus tried not to take it personally, but he couldn’t help the way that small rejection stung. Sirius kept him well-informed though. Apparently, Harry had been bringing a lot of his concerns to Sirius instead.

Sirius did his best to relieve Harry’s worries, but there wasn’t much he could offer given that they had little idea what the Dark Lord might be up to. However, he was very strict about Harry focusing only on getting through the Third Task. Regulus overheard him telling Harry one night that anything happening outside of the castle was not Harry’s concern and that he shouldn’t dwell on it. Regulus appreciated that Sirius didn’t want to burden Harry, and though he selfishly wished Harry would confide in him instead, he was glad that Harry had someone to talk to.

“Wait! We’ve got our History of Magic exam in ten minutes!” Ron yelled as Hermione took off out of the Great Hall.

“Where’s she going?” Regulus asked, having missed the entirety of their conversation.

“Dunno,” Ron said, shaking his head. “She just started mumbling about Rita.” He turned to Harry. “What are you going to do in Binn’s class — read again?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Harry responded with a half-shrug, still unaware of his surprise for the day.

“Potter,” McGonagall’s sharp voice cut in, “the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast.”

Harry looked confused, the task didn’t start until that evening, and he was probably wondering why he would need to meet up with them so early.

“The champions’ families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply a chance for you to greet them,” McGonagall explained before walking away. Ron left a moment later, hurrying to his final exam. Regulus stayed and finished his breakfast leisurely with Harry while the Great Hall slowly emptied.

“What family is supposed to be here?” Harry asked bewildered. “They’re not expecting the Dursleys to visit, are they? And anyway, I thought Sirius couldn’t come on the grounds.”

Regulus cringed slightly. “Yeah, that’s true. I’m planning to steal the map back once you enter the maze. I think Moody keeps it in his office most of the time. I doubt he’ll have it on him during the event. Then Sirius can be there when it’s over.”

Regulus had originally thought that Moody was keeping the map on him at all times, and in his growing desperation approaching the third task, he had tried multiple times to summon it from the man, but it never came. He had had to enlist the Weasley twins several times to distract Moody, and he was pretty sure that he was single-handedly funding their new prank creations with the amount of money he was giving them.

It wasn’t until he inspected Moody’s office door that he realized the wards placed on it would prevent anything inside from being summoned successfully. It was difficult to place wards like that on a specific object, so it seemed most likely that Moody was keeping it safe behind his locked office door. Regulus planned to wait until he saw Moody at the task before heading to his office to dismantle the wards and steal the map. It was a huge chore just to get Sirius on campus, but Regulus knew Harry would be happier if Sirius was there after the task was finished, and Regulus would do nearly anything to make sure Harry was happy.

“Harry, come on!” Cedric said as he, Krum, and Fleur started heading to the chamber. Regulus got up with them. Harry was a tad slower to stand, giving Regulus a curious look.

Cedric and his parents were already hugging when they entered the chamber. Krum was in the corner talking in Bulgarian to his stern-looking mother and father while Fleur was holding hands with both her mother and little sister. It took Harry a long moment to realize there were other people in the room.

“Surprise!” Mrs. Weasley shouted.

“Oh!” Harry said happily. Mrs. Weasley rushed forward to greet him while Regulus stood off to the side. Bill Weasley, the oldest of Ron’s siblings, was with her. He was easily the most attractive Weasley, not that Regulus would ever share that thought. Lupin was behind them, towering over both of them, though Harry didn’t notice him right away.

Lupin had just returned that morning, sending Regulus an owl the night prior to let him know he would make it in time. He looked tired though, and clearly worn down. Regulus wondered when the last full moon was. He never remembered to track it.

“You all right?” Bill asked Harry easily, a bright grin stretched across his handsome face. Fleur, Regulus noticed, was eyeing Bill over her shoulder, her eyes sweeping up and down quickly as she took him in.

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry said cheerfully. He finally noticed Lupin, rushing forward to hug the man tightly. Regulus felt warm watching them reunite. He wished Sirius could have been there though. He felt bad knowing he was missing this, though he and Harry talked nearly every night.

“Hey,” Lupin greeted Regulus once Harry let him go and began speaking to Bill again. Harry seemed to light up under his attention, and Regulus had to keep himself from rolling his eyes. “How are you feeling?” Lupin asked kindly.

“As calm as I can be,” Regulus answered quietly. Lupin patted him twice on the back, a grounding gesture that Regulus oddly appreciated. Ron’s mother seemed to be partially avoiding speaking to Regulus, though Bill kept throwing him polite smiles like he was trying to include him without actively annoying his mother. He knew he made the Weasleys uncomfortable, though he wasn’t totally sure why now that they knew Sirius, his fake father, was innocent and not trying to kill Harry.

“Have you seen Padfoot?” Regulus asked, dragging his eyes away from Harry and the others.

“I didn't have time,” Lupin said. “I had to come straight here. But I sent him an owl.”

Regulus nodded. He opened his mouth to say something else when he was interrupted by Amos Diggory’s loud booming voice.

“There you are,” he said, glaring at Harry who just looked confused. “I reckon you aren’t feeling so full of yourself now that you’re in last place, are you?”

Harry tilted his head slightly, looking bewildered. “What?”

“Ignore him,” Cedric said quickly before Regulus could speak, he had already taken a large step toward them. “He’s just angry because of that article Rita Skeeter wrote — where she made it seem like you were the only champion from Hogwarts.”

“Well, he didn’t bother to correct her, did he?” Amos said loudly as he and Cedric left the chamber. Regulus had to take a very long deep breath to keep himself from hexing the man. Harry only looked befuddled.

They spent the rest of the morning walking around the grounds, enjoying the sun. Harry was clearly thriving under the attention, but Regulus could tell that he was itching to ask Lupin about his absence. He was glad the Weasleys were there to act as a buffer between them. Harry didn’t need anything else to worry about.

Unfortunately, this meant that Regulus also couldn’t ask Lupin about his trip given how closely Harry was watching them. They ate lunch with Ron and the other Weasleys. Harry sat between Lupin and Regulus. His face was bright with happiness. He nearly glowed with it. Hermione joined them halfway through lunch.

“Hello, Hermione,” Mrs. Weasley greeted stiffly.

“Hello,” Hermione said with a smile that instantly faded when she noticed the way Mrs. Weasley was looking at her, a cold expression on her face. Harry frowned, the joy from his face faltering.

“Mrs. Weasley, surely you know that Rita Skeeter lies in most of her articles,” Regulus said, perhaps a tad too sharply given the way everyone at the table turned to look at him in shock. “Especially about Hermione, who has been the target of attacks for months now because of what Rita wrote about her.”

“Oh, right, of course, I know that,” Mrs. Weasley said, stumbling through the words.

“I’m sorry you had to deal with that, Hermione,” Bill said magnanimously, though he was giving Regulus an odd look out of the corner of his eye.

“That’s all right,” she mumbled. Her gaze finally settled on Lupin who had been watching the proceeding with shock and interest. Her face lit up, a slight blush across her cheeks. “Hello, Professor Lupin!”

“Hello, Hermione,” Lupin said warmly. “Though I am no longer your professor, please feel free to call me Remus.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, blushing even brighter.

“What have you been up to since you left your teaching position?” Bill asked. He said the words kindly, but Regulus could see the way Lupin froze for just a moment.

“This and that,” Lupin answered vaguely. “I hear you’re a curse breaker?” Bill grinned and immediately launched into a long spiel about his latest case. Lupin listened politely, nodding along and asking questions when appropriate, but Regulus could see the tension around his eyes.

Regulus shifted so that he was facing Harry, turning sidewise on the bench. He knew they would call the champions down soon, and he didn’t know if they would have another chance to talk. “You still have the —”

“Yes, yes, I do,” Harry said quickly touching his fingers against the amulet that was resting below his shirt. They spoke quietly, doing their best not to draw too much attention to the rest of their group.

“Take your time, okay?” Regulus said. Harry nodded. “You’ll be entering last so the others will already have an advantage. I’m sure one of them will win relatively quickly. If you find somewhere safe to wait, do so, and only move forward if you absolutely have to.”

“I know,” Harry said with another nod, a light smile on his face like he thought Regulus was being ridiculous.

“You are *not* supposed to win,” Regulus reiterated. “If you win, I’m going to be mad.”

Harry chuckled quietly. “Yes, I’m aware. I won’t win.” Regulus gave him a long, searching look but Harry stared back without flinching.

“Okay,” Regulus said quietly, finally turning back to his meal. Ginny was in the middle of explaining a new hex she had learned to which Mrs. Weasley looked horrified. Ron and Hermione were bravely holding back laughter at her reaction. Bill and Lupin were still tied up in a conversation about Egypt.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Dumbledore’s voice boomed at the end of lunch. “In five minutes’ time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the third and final task. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now.”

Harry got up before anyone could say anything to him. The easy energy had fled and Regulus could now see the way Harry was shaking just slightly. The Gryffindors applauded him as he left, the Weasleys and Hermione all wished him good luck, while Lupin stood to walk him out of the Hall.

Lupin was waiting for Regulus when he walked down to the Quidditch pitch just a few minutes later.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“Harry’s prepared,” Regulus responded. Lupin continued to watch him. “Yes,” Regulus admitted. Lupin smiled briefly before it fell.

“At least he’s prepared,” Lupin said. Regulus thought he was making fun of him for a moment before he noticed the way he was watching the maze, that it was a creature all on its own, preparing to swallow Harry whole. Harry and the other champions were already out on the pitch standing in front of the entrance to the maze. “They’ve charmed it so that it’s larger on the inside. I wonder how long it’ll take one of them to win.”

“Hopefully not long,” Regulus said. He spotted Moody right away, standing near Harry but not speaking to him thankfully. “*Accio.*” Nothing happened. Regulus was almost hoping that he would have it on him this time, but of course, he was out of luck. “I’ll be back.”

Lupin nodded at him, already aware of his plan, and headed into the stands to take a seat. Once Regulus was out of sight of the Quidditch pitch, he took off running. He needed to make it there as fast as possible. He was panting heavily by the time he reached the office and had to double over and put his hands on his knees to catch his breath. He was in much better shape during his first life with Quidditch practice multiple times a week keeping him sharp.

The wards were thick and extremely complicated. Regulus wasn’t exactly surprised, Moody was an Auror after all, surely they were trained on how to create intricate wards. The surprising thing was the way the wards felt familiar to him. As he worked to untangle them, a bead of sweat starting to slide down the back of his neck, he couldn’t help but feel like he had done this before. It was like an unsettling form of déjà vu.

It took him nearly half an hour to get the ward down, and Regulus was exhausted by that point. Not to mention that he was almost certain that Moody would have some alert set up for if someone tampered with his wards. Regulus knew a lot about wards thanks to his research a few summers prior, but he wasn’t skilled enough to hope to sneak in without detection.

He shoved into the cluttered office and immediately spotted the map. It was lying open on Moody's desk as if he had just been looking at it before heading down to the task. Regulus wondered why he didn't bother bringing it with him. Who was he watching for? Regulus glanced over it quickly, checking that no one was in the castle with him, Moody especially, before pulling out the mirror.

"Sirius," Regulus spoke quickly. There was a shuffling noise and then Sirius's face filled the mirror. He was in the forest, probably as close to the grounds as he could get without being spotted on the map while waiting for Regulus to call. "I have the map. Lupin is in the stands at the pitch if you want to find him."

"Excellent," Sirius said. "There have already been some red sparks, I think one of the students was taken out of the maze."

"Oh," Regulus said surprised. "Okay, well, I'll meet you back down there."

"Sounds good," Sirius said distractedly before he disappeared, the mirror settling back into his neutral state.

Regulus turned to grab the map before a chest in the corner of Moody's office began rattling back and forth, a loud shout coming from inside it. He jumped in shock, the noise startling him. He watched the chest uncomfortably until the noise stopped. What could Moody possibly be keeping in there? He was almost tempted to try and open it, but given how unstable Moody seemed, he doubted he wanted to know what he kept locked up in his office.

He glanced down at the map, preparing to grab it and head back to the pitch when something caught his eye. There was now someone rushing toward him through the empty halls of the Hogwarts. Regulus repressed a shiver, there was something very unsettling about the way the person was moving, the way their name seemed to jolt left and right as they ran.

It wasn't Moody though. No, instead it was Bartemius Crouch. Crouch had been missing for weeks now, even Percy was under investigation for his disappearance. How had he managed to get passed everyone outside, everyone that was looking for him, and into the castle without detection? And more importantly, why was he headed for Moody's office?

Regulus thought that maybe he was coming in search of help, maybe he thought Moody would be able to offer him safety. Regardless, it wouldn't do for Regulus to be there, having broken into Moody's office when he arrived.

"Mischief managed," Regulus said, touching his wand to the map as he spoke. He folded it up and stuffed it in his pocket before heading out the office door. He didn't bother to lock it, Moody would know someone had been there regardless, there was no way that Regulus could replicate his original wards, especially not in the short amount of time he had left.

He was rushing down the steps outside the office and halfway through the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom when the door flew open. Regulus pulled out his wand. Crouch must have been moving faster than he originally realized. He should have thought to bring Harry's cloak with him, but he figured he wouldn't have to hide from anyone. He looked up at the door.

“Of course, it’s you,” Moody spoke. Regulus’s eyes widened. Moody stood blocking the door that slammed closed behind him. Where was Crouch? He hadn’t seen Moody approaching on the map.

Regulus lowered his wand, but he didn’t put it away, he still didn’t trust Moody, but he didn’t want to point his wand directly at the Auror and accidentally escalate things before necessary.

“You were breaking into my office,” Moody said, his voice sounded vaguely impressed, like the mere audacity to break into an Auror’s office was something to commend.

Regulus sighed, putting on his best caught expression, trying to look both abashed and desperate like a fourteen-year-old in this situation should. “Fred and George dared me to break in,” Regulus lied quickly. “But I couldn’t get passed the wards.”

Moody’s face twitched freakishly, his eyes unreadable. “Clever,” Moody snarled. “But not clever enough.”

the third task.

Chapter Notes

cw: gore, minor character death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Sounds good,” Sirius said distractedly, already tucking the mirror into his pocket, Regulus’s voice fading instantly. He would see him in a minute anyway. He had been itching for the mirror call the moment Regulus told him his plan. He had spent all morning pacing the Forbidden Forest waiting. He transformed into Padfoot and took off. He wasn’t far, just a bit into the forest near Hagrid’s hut. He wouldn’t be seen here, but he was at least close enough that he could make it to the pitch quickly.

The run there was exhilarating. Not a single person was out on the grounds, all of them packed into the Quidditch pitch like a bunch of sardines, the noise coming from the area comically loud compared to the barren and silent grounds. He slinked into the pitch, doing his best not to draw attention to himself. It was difficult given his size, but he did his best, moving quickly and quietly.

It was overwhelming with the amount of noise and scents permeating the relatively small area, but he was able to pick out Remus’s smell almost instantly. He was very familiar with it, and very used to tracking it down. He followed it quickly, up into the stands to find Remus sitting next to Harry’s friends: Hermione, Ron, and Luna.

“Regulus was successful then?” Remus asked lightly. He tossed out a hand and buried it in the fur around Sirius’s neck. Sirius sat right in front of him, leaning sideways so that he was propped up on Remus’s shin. He missed him so much, it was almost worse than the time he spent in Azkaban, and he found himself breathing in his comforting scent over and over again.

Sirius nudged him on the knee, silently asking who the red sparks he had seen belonged to. He wondered if Harry had just forfeited immediately. Sirius wouldn’t be surprised if that was what Regulus had told him to do. It would keep him safe at least. He hoped Remus understood his question.

“It was Cedric Diggory,” Remus said helpfully, always in tune with what Sirius wanted. “They brought him through on a stretcher not long ago. I was going to go down and ask if he was okay in a minute or so.”

Sirius leaned his cheek up against Remus’s knee as if to say *yes, let’s do that*. Sirius felt a few small fingers brush up against the top of his head, and he lifted up to see who it was.

Luna was watching him a delicate smile in place. She didn't say anything, so Sirius just dropped his head back into Remus's lap, allowing her to scratch him.

About ten minutes passed before Remus stood, Sirius following close behind him. "I'll be back," he told the others who just nodded. They headed down the stairs and into the champions' tent. Cedric was lying flat on his back in one of the beds, his eyes closed tightly. Amos and his wife were sitting on the bed next to him, arguing in whispered tones.

"This tent is for champions only," Karkaroff said gruffly. He had his wand drawn for some reason, though he was holding it low next to his hip. Sirius growled loudly, and Karkaroff's nervous eyes flitted down to Sirius's face.

"We just came to check on Cedric," Remus said easily, brushing his fingers against the top of Sirius's head to calm him. "He is an ex-student of mine."

"You're Professor Lupin?" Mrs. Diggory asked. She had stood up from where she was sitting and walked over silently without Sirius noticing.

"I am," Remus replied politely with a small nod.

"Cedric mentioned you, he said you were the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher he'd ever had," she said kindly.

Sirius could practically smell Remus blushing. "Oh, well, that's too kind," he said. "Is he all right? We saw him taken out of the maze and just wanted to check in."

Mrs. Diggory's face did something complicated, and Sirius noticed her glance over at Karkaroff who was watching the conversation with keen interest. The smell of fear was heavy, rolling off of her in waves.

"Oh, yes, he's — he's quite all right," Mrs. Diggory said before clearing her throat uncomfortably. Remus looked over at Karkaroff as well.

"Is there anything I can do?" Remus asked.

"No, no, he'll be fine," Mrs. Diggory said, the calm, polite mask back in place. "But thank you for your concern, it is much appreciated."

"Of course," Remus said and turned to leave the tent. Sirius was unsatisfied, nudging Remus the entire time out to get him to go back and ask again. "Stop nudging me, you daft thing," Remus whispered quietly.

Quite rude, Sirius thought, given that they had barely spoken in nearly two months. He huffed unhappily.

"They're not going to say anything with Karkaroff in the room, and I can't very well make him leave, can I?" Remus explained quickly before turning away. "Albus!"

Sirius hadn't noticed Dumbledore standing just a bit off from one of the entrances to the pitch, he had his hand clasped tightly behind his back and was talking in hushed tones to the

headmistress of Beauxbatons, Sirius could never recall her name.

“Ah, hello, Remus,” Dumbledore said blandly. The headmistress turned away, her face twisted with a strain that Sirius did not understand. “And Padfoot. Good to see you.”

“Did something happen to Cedric Diggory?” Remus asked bluntly, speaking low enough that they wouldn’t be overheard.

“He has claimed that he was attacked,” Dumbledore said evasively.

“Attacked by what? I know there are monsters in the maze,” Remus said quickly.

“How you are aware of that is a mystery to me,” Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye, before his sober expression was back. “But no, it was not a monster. He says that he was attacked by another champion. Viktor Krum.”

“Oh,” Remus said faintly. “That’s very ruthless, but it explains Karkaroff’s reaction. Are they forbidden from attacking each other?”

“They are not, it is a competition after all, but he used the Cruciatus Curse on him. Cedric was forced to call for help as he was no longer able to move correctly and was in grave danger.”

“The Cruciatus — why would he do that?” Remus asked a bit too loudly.

“That is the question. Until he is returned to us, we do not know. Cedric will recover, and no lasting harm has been done, but it is concerning.”

“Do you think he would attack the others?” Remus asked. Sirius huffed again, the answer seemed obvious to him. If Krum was willing to use Unforgivables, then clearly he would have no issue using them freely on anyone that got in his way. “Are there any plans to pull him out of the competition?”

“I have attempted to do so,” Dumbledore said, frowning tightly. “But Minister Fudge has disagreed with my opinion. He sees no present danger.”

“I forgot Fudge was here,” Remus said. “He’s taking over for Crouch?”

“That is correct,” Dumbledore replied.

“Any word on that?” Remus asked tightly. Dumbledore shook his head.

“He seems to have vanished into thin air,” Dumbledore said. Dumbledore was distracted away from them a moment later and Remus and Sirius were left alone, both of them looking uncomfortably at the entrance to the maze. Sirius wished he could just run in and find Harry. He worried that he was out there with Krum on the loose. He didn’t even realize that he was whining quietly until Remus began scratching behind his ears.

“Harry will be okay,” Remus said quietly. “Regulus would have prepared him for this. He’ll be fine.”

Speaking of which, where was Regulus? Sirius would have expected him back by now, but he hadn't noticed him. He nudged Remus toward their seats, hoping that Regulus might be there with his and Harry's friends, having missed Remus and Sirius completely. Remus acquiesced, walking up the stairs.

Regulus wasn't there, but Remus sat down, so Sirius did too. His emotions were narrowed as a dog, much less complicated than they were as a human being, and though he had the ability to think critically in that form, it wasn't nearly as clear as it could have been. He kept looking around, feeling like he was missing something. Surely Regulus would be back soon, but every time he thought about it, his thoughts would zero back in on whether Harry was safe in the maze.

The event stretched on for a long time. Sirius couldn't be sure how long, but long enough that he was worried. Remus was worried too, he could tell by the way his leg bounced anxiously. Ron, Hermione, and Luna had stopped speaking altogether. Ron was running his fingers through his hair, pulling on the roots over and over again, his eyes scrunched up like he was being forced to look at something that was causing him pain. Hermione was biting her nails viciously while Luna was sitting as still as a statue.

After what had to be nearly an hour of time, Lucius Malfoy's son jumped to his feet startling the other Slytherins and Durmstrang students who were all sitting quietly. They weren't far off from where Sirius sat with the others, so he could see his face rather clearly. He looked like he was going to be sick, his face green and covered in sweat. He took off out of the stands like he was on fire, sprinting down the steps and running toward the exit.

"What's that about?" Remus asked quietly. A small girl with black hair jumped to her feet as well after a few-second delay and started running after Malfoy.

"Draco, wait!" she called, her voice high-pitched and sharp.

Ron groaned suddenly, bending forward to put his head between his knees. "Ron, what's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing," Ron muttered, his voice muffled. "Just a headache. It'll pass. It has to." He whispered the last words, so low that Sirius wouldn't have caught it had he not been in his animagus form. Remus stiffened beside him, clearly having heard the words as well with his advanced werewolf senses.

The crowd was silent as the minutes clicked by, the tension in the air palpable and uncomfortable. Sirius was leaning heavily against Remus's leg, he was like an anchor in a sea of disquiet. Sirius noticed Karkaroff whispering harshly to Snape. Snape sneered at the man, before snapping something and shaking his head. Karkaroff's face grew pale with anger before he turned on his heel and left the pitch.

A few minutes later there was a whooshing sound and right in front of the maze was Harry holding the Triwizard Cup. He was curled around it like a child sleeping with a stuffed animal. He wasn't moving.

Sirius was up and running before he could even consciously think to do so. “Harry,” Remus shouted behind him, the noise nearly drowned out by the torrent of sounds that erupted upon Harry’s arrival. Sirius sprinted toward Harry’s still form, moving so quickly that no one was even close to him by the time he arrived.

He hunched over Harry’s sniffing him and nudging him. He smelled alive, but there was a rotten scent drifting off his clothes and skin. And blood. He could smell blood. Harry was bleeding. Harry curled in on himself even further, gripping the Cup tighter against his chest.

“Harry. Harry!” Remus’s voice was suddenly above them. He had run out to Harry as well, though a bit slower than Sirius was able to. He kneeled next to the boy, reaching out to lightly touch his face. Harry turned his head very slowly, his hazy eyes blinking open.

“He’s back,” Harry whispered. “He’s back. Voldemort.”

“What?” Remus breathed. Sirius wiggled closer, dislodging the cup from Harry’s fingers and replacing it with his own body. Harry buried his fingers into his fur, his hands shaking slightly.

“What did he say?” Dumbledore said faintly.

“He’s back. Regulus told me not to win. It’s my fault that he’s back,” Harry said, he stared up unseeingly at Dumbledore’s worried face.

“Harry, no, it’s okay,” Remus said quietly.

“It’s not okay!” Harry shouted abruptly. “Voldemort’s back! He’s back.”

“What’s going on?” Fudge yelled. He was frowning down at them.

“Okay, let’s go into the champions’ tent,” Remus said.

“No, you don’t understand! You’re not listening.” It was odd to hear someone yell while they were lying on the ground cuddling a giant dog.

“I am,” Remus said placatingly. “But there are a lot of people here. Let’s get you out of the public eye.”

Harry scrunched up his face, and Sirius couldn’t tell if he was about to argue again, or if he might start crying when he relaxed slightly and nodded. “Where is Regulus?” he whispered.

Sirius froze. Regulus. He had been so distracted, he had been so focused on Harry. Where was Regulus? He had never come back.

“Can you alert the professors to pull Ms. Delacour and Mr. Krum out of the maze?”

Dumbledore said to Hagrid who had just walked up. He, like many of the other professors, had been patrolling the outside of the maze.

“O’ course, Professor Dumbledore, Sir,” Hagrid said. “Congratulations, Harry,” he added before stomping off.

“I think Krum was *imperiused*,” Harry muttered.

Remus shifted down, put his hands under Harry’s arms, and lifted him to his feet. Harry was unsteady, but he stayed standing up. Sirius glued himself to his side until they made it into the champions’ tent.

“Is it over?” Mrs. Diggory asked frantically.

“It is,” Remus said. “Would you mind giving us a moment?”

“Oh — oh,” she said, looking at Harry who was pale and distraught-looking. “Of course. Amos, let’s step outside.”

The moment they were alone, just Remus, Harry, Sirius, and Dumbledore, Sirius transformed. Cedric was still unconscious and Sirius wasn’t worried about being spotted.

“Where is Regulus? Has anyone seen him?” Sirius asked instantly. Remus tried to guide Harry over to the bed.

“He’s not here?” Harry asked, pulling away from Remus, his eyes wide with terror.

“He went to —” Sirius eyed Dumbledore for a moment before giving in. “He was breaking into Moody’s office. He had to get something back from him so that I could be here.”

“Where is Moody?” Remus asked, though, by the look on his face, he had just realized something horrible.

“He said he needed to check on something. He hasn’t been back,” Dumbledore said, his frown deepening even further. Moody was gone, most likely back to his office where Regulus was. Regulus had never come back. Moody, the madman, had him.

“Sirius,” Remus said quietly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize he had left. I would have warned him. I’m sorry.”

Sirius felt like he might be sick. Harry’s already shaky legs gave out beneath him, but Remus was there to hold him upright.

“I think you should take Mr. Potter here to the Hospital Wing,” Dumbledore said. “We can talk more there.”

“No, I want to —” Harry started to say.

Sirius didn’t wait to hear what he wanted. Remus would watch out for Harry and together they would figure out what happened. For now, Sirius had to find Regulus, he needed to make sure he was okay. He transformed back into Padfoot before leaving the tent. Cedric’s parents were right outside, whispering to each other. Mrs. Diggory yelped in surprise when Padfoot ran past her.

He ran as hard as he could, sprinting up to the castle. It was still empty, no one in sight, as he made his way up to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Only a corridor away, an

awful smell filled his nostrils. It was like something rotting, but as if someone had tried to cover the smell with the scent of flowers. The mixture made him gag.

He transformed back, freezing in place. He couldn't bear to smell that as Padfoot. It was too much. He felt dizzy all of a sudden. What if Regulus was hurt? What if Moody had done something to him? Regulus had been complaining about the way Moody watched him, about the way he treated students who had "Death Eater" parents, and Regulus had broken into his office just so Sirius could be on the grounds.

Why did he do that? It was so stupid. Sirius was so stupid. Why didn't he tell him not to? He swallowed harshly and drew his wand, slowly walking toward the silent classroom. He couldn't smell the rot as he could before, but the moment he opened the door, another scent hit him square in the face.

He spotted Regulus immediately. He was lying in the middle of the room on his back, his eyes closed. He'd been tortured, Sirius realized as he took him in. That was the only explanation for why he would have lost control of his faculties. That's what the smell was then. Sirius kneeled next to him, his eyes never straying from Regulus's blank face.

"Regulus? Regulus, can you hear me?" Sirius whispered. Regulus did not respond. He checked for a pulse, it was faint, but it was there. He watched Regulus take a shuttering breath. "*Enervate*."

Regulus groaned so quietly that Sirius almost didn't hear him. "Please," he rasped. His eyes never opened and right after he spoke, his breathing deepened again. He was too weak to awaken. Sirius needed to get him help.

He stood up, preparing to lift Regulus, when something caught his eye. The room itself was disheveled as if there had been a fight, desks knocked over and two of them broken. What had happened here? More than that, Regulus wasn't alone in the room. He hadn't noticed when he was so focused on his little brother, but on the other side of the room lay another body.

Sirius couldn't see who it was at first, he inched closer, wondering if he should just take Regulus out of the room and come back to check, but what if this person was a threat? He took a steadying breath.

"*Expecto Patronum*," he said, the memory of his first Christmas at the Potters' flowing through him like sunlight. Padfoot leaped from his wand. "Go get Dumbledore, tell him his assistance is needed in the Defense Classroom." Padfoot spun in a circle before leaping off, disappearing through a wall.

Sirius turned back to the other person in the room. He could only really see their legs from this angle, but they didn't appear to be moving. He inched forward uncertainly, feeling as if something might jump out at him.

"Hello?" he called. There was no reply. He took a deep breath and stepped out around a desk that blocked his view.

The first thing he saw was blood. A lot of blood. He almost couldn't see their body because of how much blood there was. He took a step forward, muttering to himself, "Don't be a coward." When he stepped closer, he realized it wasn't just blood he was seeing. The entire chest cavity of the person looked like it had been torn open. It was as if someone had hit the person with a blasting curse from the inside.

Sirius covered his mouth and nose with his hand, but he couldn't look away. He stepped just a bit closer and was finally able to make out the person's face. He was very obviously dead, his eyes wide and vacant. Sirius stared at the man for a long moment. He was sure that he recognized him, but he couldn't place him at first.

He stared and stared and finally, it clicked.

"Barty."

Chapter End Notes

i saved that stupid fucking hufflepuff, aren't you happy? (i have no reason to be this antagonistic)

on my tumblr, i made a post that explains why cedric diggory survived in my version of events if you're interested: [cedric's post](#)

the disbelief.

“No, I want to —” Harry started to say but Sirius didn’t stay to hear him. Remus caught the look Sirius threw his way, the look that said *I have to find, Regulus. Please take care of Harry*. Remus nodded solemnly, though Sirius wasn’t watching him long enough to see it.

“Let’s get to the Hospital Wing,” Remus said gently. Harry turned a vicious glare on him, and Remus had to work not to recoil. Harry was distraught and upset, he wouldn’t be intentionally cruel. “Wherever Regulus is, Sirius will bring him to the Hospital Wing.”

Harry’s shoulders dropped, the slight tremble returning to his hands. “He’s going to be so mad at me,” Harry muttered, hanging his head in shame.

“He will be very glad that you’re alive and that you’re safe,” Remus corrected. “Come on. Let’s go, then you can tell me what happened.”

His heart raced in his chest as they walked together. He put an arm around Harry’s shoulders, just a reminder that he was there with him, that he wasn’t alone. Harry immediately leaned into his side and the two of them walked together in silence. Dumbledore let them go alone, pulling away to talk to the other judges.

“Oh, Harry, is it over then?” Madam Pomfrey asked when they walked into the Wing. She looked frazzled. The nurse’s cap on her head was tilted to the side, her usually neat hair frizzing outward.

“Can we get a calming draught, please?” Remus asked. “And Harry has a wound on his arm.”

Madam Pomfrey nodded immediately, gesturing over to the bed closest to the door. Harry didn’t speak or even react as she cleaned and wrapped his forearm in gauze. Remus looked around the Wing. There was only one bed occupied in the farthest corner of the room. Remus hadn’t noticed it at first, but there was a tuft of white hair sticking out from the top of the blankets.

Next to the bed sat Pansy Parkinson. Her face was streaked with drying tears, but she was looking up at Remus with resolve like she was expecting to be challenged. It was no doubt Draco Malfoy lying next to her, but Remus had no idea what might have happened to the boy.

Remus wondered how long it would take Sirius to find Regulus. He wished he had thought to ask for the mirror. He felt like he was in limbo.

Madam Pomfrey walked off to get something from her office, and Remus took a seat in the conjured chair next to his bed. Harry was staring blankly at his stretched-out legs. Remus wondered how long it would be before Harry’s friends arrived from the pitch. It couldn’t be very long.

“Harry,” Remus said. Harry didn’t respond. “Harry, can you tell me what happened?”

Harry finally looked up at him, but the moment they made eye contact, his eyes filled with tears, his face scrunching up in the beginnings of a sob.

“Oh, Harry,” Remus said softly. He moved so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed instead, and wrapped his arms around Harry, pulling him into a hug. Harry dug his fingers into Remus’s clothing, gripping him tightly like he was afraid if he let go, Remus might be ripped away.

“Regulus told me not to win,” Harry said miserably.

“It’s okay,” Remus said. “Just tell me what happened.”

Harry pulled back slightly, wiping off his face with the un-torn sleeve of his dirty shirt. “The cup was a Portkey,” Harry said finally. “It took me to a graveyard. Voldemort was there.”

Remus squeezed his shoulders. “How?” he asked, not meaning to let the words out. His heart raced at the thought of Voldemort, the man who had murdered his friends, who had killed Harry’s parents. He knew that he would be back, the knowledge of the Horcruxes weighed heavily on his shoulders, but he hadn’t thought it would be so soon.

Harry shook his head. “They made a potion, using my blood, and he got his body back,” Harry said.

“Who is we?” Remus asked.

“Voldemort and Wormtail,” Harry said, looking down at his hands which were now cradled in his lap.

“Peter?” Remus asked, his chest clenching painfully. He suddenly felt like the last full moon hadn’t actually gone, as if he might transform in the middle of the Hospital Wing against his will. The control against his building rage was hard won, but he thankfully managed not to lose his cool.

“Your eyes,” Harry said faintly, staring at Remus’s face.

Remus blinked several times. “Ignore them. What happened next?”

Harry shook his head as if to clear it. “Voldemort called the Death Eaters and then we... dueled.”

“You dueled Voldemort?” Remus asked. His hands tightened around Harry’s shoulders again. He consciously loosened them, not wanting to hurt him.

Harry nodded. “He tried to torture me.” The words were choked out with a whine. “But it didn’t work.” He reached for something beneath his shirt and pulled out a black amulet. It was cracked down the middle, the magical light within it had already faded.

“I’m so sorry,” Remus said, his throat tight.

“I got away. My wand — my wand did something funny, and I saw my mum. She came out of his wand,” Harry said, his eyes far away in a memory.

“You saw Lily?” Remus asked. Harry nodded. “Is that how you got away?”

Harry nodded again, smiling slightly. “She was able to hold him off, and I *accioed* the cup. It brought me back to the pitch.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Remus mumbled helplessly, hugging Harry to him again. Harry slumped against him, burying his head in Remus’s shoulder.

“Harry! Is he okay? What’s going on?” Hermione’s voice came echoing through the mostly empty Wing. Remus looked up at her, Harry pulling away. Madam Pomfrey came back out of her office, Remus just now realizing that she had left to give them a moment.

Remus stepped back as he was swarmed by his three friends. They wrapped around Harry like a protective shield. Molly Weasley and her son Bill entered just a second after the three children arrived. Fred and George Weasley along with Ginny brung up the rear and shut the doors behind them.

“Miss Parkinson, you may go,” Madam Pomfrey said as she shuffled through the Wing. Pansy glared at her, before standing up and pulling the curtains closed around Draco’s bed to shield him from the hoard of Weasleys. She left a moment later, stomping out of the Hospital Wing, her footsteps echoing loudly.

She had only been gone for a few moments when the doors flew open again. McGonagall came in first, her face stern and pale. Behind her were two floating stretchers. The first one carried what looked like Mad-Eye Moody, except he was much thinner than he had appeared earlier. He was also without his wooden leg and his magical eye was missing. The second stretcher held Regulus, also unconscious. Padfoot was with them, walking right next to Regulus’s floating stretcher like the guard dog he was.

“What happened?” Harry asked sharply, already standing up.

Madam Pomfrey bustled over to McGonagall as she slowly lowered the stretcher onto beds on opposite sides of the room, the stretchers vanishing once both Moody and Regulus were lying on top of the mattresses. Harry ran over to Regulus before Remus could stop him, not that he wanted to. He was over there as well, leaning over Regulus’s prone form. He stank of cleaning charms as if someone had cast *scourgify* on him several times before bringing him to the infirmary.

“There are too many people in my Hospital Wing,” Madam Pomfrey said sharply after she finished whispering to McGonagall. “Everyone except my patients needs to leave.”

McGonagall was already leaving as she spoke, looking like a woman on a mission. The Weasleys and Harry's friends looked stricken and torn. Harry gave them a small, uncomfortable grimace as an apology as they all slowly started drifting out of the Hospital Wing with promises to talk to him first thing in the morning. Remus didn’t move, and neither

did Sirius, though Madam Pomfrey said nothing, moving to attend to Moody who was talking to her in a low voice, having been woken up by the noise of her dismissal.

“What happened?” Harry asked again, looking at Sirius. Sirius didn’t move or react for a second, but finally, the Hospital Wing doors closed for the last time, and he transformed back into his human form. Remus looked over at Moody uncertainly, but the man seemed completely unbothered by the appearance of Sirius.

“Regulus was attacked,” Sirius said, his voice devoid of emotion. Remus wanted to hold him, but he couldn’t make himself move. He doubted his affection would be well received at the moment anyway.

“Is he going to be okay?” Harry asked frantically.

Sirius waited just a beat too long before responding, “I’m sure he’ll be fine.” It wasn’t convincing, and Harry immediately crumbled.

“Do you know what spells were used on him?” Madam Pomfrey asked as she came over, Moody now sleeping peacefully in his bed.

Sirius looked at Harry for a moment before turning to Pomfrey. “Harry, let’s give them a moment to talk,” Remus said gently.

“No! I want to know what happened. Who attacked him? Was it him?” Harry turned his ruthless glare on Moody’s sleeping form.

“No — no, it wasn’t him,” Sirius said quickly like he expected Harry to just pull out his wand and hex the ex-Auror on the spot. He probably would if he got the chance, Remus realized. Remus looked at Sirius questioningly. If not Moody, then who could have attacked him? “I’ll explain in a moment, okay?” he said imploringly.

Harry looked deeply unhappy and borderline distressed with the request but ultimately acquiesced and went back to his bed. Remus went with him. He wanted to hear what Sirius had to say too, but Harry needed to not be left alone, especially after what he just went through. Making sure Harry was okay was more important than hearing everything right that moment. Sirius pulled the curtain to separate them and cast a silencing charm so he and Madam Pomfrey couldn’t overhear.

Harry and Remus didn’t speak as they waited. Harry didn’t initiate anything, and Remus had nothing to offer. Harry, Remus noticed, looked extremely exhausted. The moment he was lying down, his eyes started to droop, though they would shoot open again as if in a panic every couple of seconds. Remus, without saying anything, reached out and grabbed Harry’s hand.

That seemed to do the trick because a second later Harry’s eyes were fully closed, and his breathing was already beginning to even out. Remus felt his own exhaustion settle into his bones. He was about as far from a full moon as he could get, the last one being twelve days prior, yet the bone-shifting feeling was still there. He had barely slept while in Albania, trying to make use of the limited time he had available. It was a fruitless journey anyway. He would

have been better served spending those months staying in Hogsmeade and taking care of Sirius who looked gaunt and disheveled.

Sirius came out from behind the curtain after a while, rubbing his face tiredly. Remus watched him carefully from where he was sitting next to Harry's bed. Harry had begun to snore softly.

"Are you okay?" Remus asked. Sirius squinted, looking off to the side while he placed his hands on his hips. Remus instantly conjured a chair next to his own, and Sirius slumped down into it like a broken doll. Remus kept his one hand linked with Harry's and reached the other up to pull Sirius to him.

Sirius clung to him tightly, taking heavy breaths in through his mouth. Remus felt a zing of fondness slip through him. He could still remember the first time Sirius had done that, explaining to Remus that after he first became an animagus, he suddenly couldn't get enough of the way Remus smelled.

Back then, it had made Remus feel unsettled, he was so disconnected from his own wolfishness, and he was mildly disgusted by any display of animalism in anyone else. After their falling out in fifth year, and especially after they finally got together in seventh year, Remus finally understood that Sirius wanted to breathe him in like that because he loved him. It was the first — and only — time he had been glad that he was a werewolf.

He did it now again, breathing Remus in like it was the only creature comfort that could save him. His breath hitched as he did so though, his arms tightening and loosening periodically. Remus waited for him to relax before asking anything.

"It wasn't Moody," Sirius finally said. Remus hummed quietly, urging Sirius to explain. "The entire time. The whole school year. It wasn't Moody that was teaching them. He was being kept in a trunk in his office."

Remus pulled back just enough to see Sirius's face, but Sirius dropped his arms and sat back in his chair. Remus regretted the lack of contact. "How did no one realize?"

"He didn't show up on the map," Sirius explained. He was staring at one of the buttons on the sweater Remus was wearing, his eyes distant and unfocused. "The trunk he had — Moody made it himself — the inside is basically unplotable. I didn't even know that was possible, but it meant that he couldn't be seen on the map."

"Who was it then?" Remus asked. Sirius finally looked up at him, his eyes suddenly blazing with anger.

"Barty Crouch Jr.," Sirius said with a sneer.

"Junior?" Remus asked. "I thought — didn't he die?"

Sirius shook his head. "That's what I thought," Sirius said. "I remember him in Azkaban. He was so loud at first, but after a month or so he stopped screaming. That wasn't uncommon."

Remus cringed. The mentions of Azkaban always flooded him with self-loathing and regret.

"I remember there were mentions that he died, other prisoners talking through the walls about how his body had been removed. The dementors just buried him outside the prison walls."

"Then how?"

"I don't know," Sirius said shaking his head again. "We might never know. They'll have to exhume the body that was buried there — if there even is one." He was silent for a moment, clearly deep in thought. "Apparently, I'm not the first person to escape Azkaban though."

"Apparently not," Remus muttered. "Where is Barty now?"

"Dead," Sirius said harshly, clenching his teeth tightly.

Remus widened his eyes in surprise. "Did you?" he asked vaguely. Sirius shook his head. He was going to get a headache if he kept doing that, Remus thought.

"I wish I had," he muttered lowly. "No, he was dead when I arrived."

"How?"

"I'm not sure," Sirius said. "Dumbledore checked Regulus's wand, but he hadn't cast a single spell that would have caused the damage Barty had endured."

Remus sighed. There were so many unanswered questions. He felt like everything that could possibly have gone wrong today had gone wrong. He still had yet to think about the implications of Voldemort being back from the dead — or the half-dead.

"What happened to Regulus?" he whispered.

"Barty attacked him," Sirius said, squinting again like he was trying to control his tear ducts by pure force. "He tortured him. Regulus. He wouldn't wake up. Barty was with Bellatrix and the Lestranges when they —"

Remus didn't think about it, he just grabbed Sirius and dragged him back in. "I'm sure he'll be okay," Remus muttered right into Sirius's ear. "He's very resilient." Sirius let out a quiet, choked sob. "He already came back from the dead, he can recover from this too." Sirius chuckled wetly. It was the best noise Remus had ever heard.

Madam Pomfrey came out from behind the curtain then, walking swiftly to her office, before returning with a handful of potion vials, disappearing once again behind the curtain.

"How is Harry?" Sirius asked, pulling away again and scrubbing his face clean of tears. It was a move so similar to Harry's that Remus nearly laughed. He sobered though when he thought of Harry. He was far too young to have gone through so much.

"Traumatized," Remus said. "I don't know how he made it back, how he could have lived through something like that, and now..."

“Is he really back?” Sirius asked tonelessly.

“Harry fought him,” Remus said. Sirius gasped quietly, and Remus nodded in acknowledgment. “He says they dueled after Voldemort called his Death Eaters.”

“How did he survive?” Sirius asked.

“I’m not sure,” Remus said. “He says that he saw Lily, that she came out of Voldemort’s wand and protected him long enough so that he could get away.”

“Lily?” Sirius whispered, looking once again like he might start crying before schooling his expression.

“There’s something else,” Remus said regretfully. Sirius tilted his head in question. “Peter was there.”

Sirius looked like might start screaming, but was interrupted immediately when Madam Pomfrey stuck her head out of the curtain. “He’s awake if you’d like to speak to him.” Sirius stood up, but before he could walk over, the Hospital Wing doors opened, and he had to quickly transform back into his animagus form to avoid being spotted.

Fudge came barging in, Dumbledore close behind him looking uncharacteristically worried. McGonagall entered a second later looking enraged. Remus tensed immediately.

“Where is Mr. Black?” Fudge demanded loudly. Harry startled awake, his fingers tightening around Remus’s hand as he shook awake. Padfoot snarled deeply, his hackles rising intimidatingly. “Control your pet, Mr. Lupin.”

“Why do you need to talk to Mr. Black?” Remus asked stiffly, ignoring Fudge’s request.

“A man is dead,” Fudge said sternly.

“I do not believe that is quite fair,” Dumbledore interrupted to say, frowning deeply at Fudge.

“Not fair?” Fudge yelled belligerently. “One of your students murdered someone. We should be bringing him into the Ministry for questioning. I am only speaking to him here as a professional courtesy.” Sirius snapped his teeth at Fudge who jumped in shock, though he was clearly trying to hide it.

“You are not speaking to him at all,” Remus said, dropping Harry’s hand so that he could stand between Fudge and the silenced curtain that Regulus was laying behind.

“That boy is a murderer,” Fudge spat. “For all we know, he is responsible for the death of Bartemius Crouch Senior as well.”

That caused quite an uproar. McGonagall scoffed dismissively. Harry was shouting immediately. “He wasn’t even near us when Crouch was attacked. Regulus had nothing to do with that.” Remus bent forward to hold Sirius by the scruff of his neck, afraid that he might take off and attack Fudge.

Moody had been woken by all the shouting as well. “Mr. Black is the only reason I’m not still trapped in a trunk being tormented by an escaped Death Eater.” Fudge yelled something back at him that Remus didn’t quite catch. Sirius was growling so loudly that he could barely make out any words.

“Silence!” Dumbledore said sharply, his voice louder than Remus had ever heard of it.

“There are more pressing issues than Barty’s death,” Remus said when the others quieted in surprise.

“What could be more pressing —”

“Voldemort has returned,” Remus interrupted Fudge to say. Fudge flinched at the name.

“You-Know-Who... returned? That is preposterous,” Fudge said.

“What?” Harry said, looking outraged. “He’s back. I fought him.”

Fudge looked worried, but he let out a strangled and dismissive laugh. He glanced at Dumbledore who was watching Harry with a serious expression. “You can’t seriously believe that.”

“There was a Death Eater in the school,” Dumbledore said. “It is possible —”

“I am not going to believe that on the word of a boy who... well...”

“A boy who what?” McGonagall demanded.

Harry’s eyebrows lowered on his face into a flat expression of disdain. “You’ve been reading Rita Skeeter, Mr. Fudge,” he said, deadly quiet. Fudge’s face reddened hideously, but he looked defiant and obstinate.

“And if I have?” he said, before looking over at Dumbledore. “If I have discovered that you’ve been keeping certain facts about the boy quiet? A Parselmouth, eh? And having funny turns all over the place —”

“Look!” Harry interrupted. “I saw Voldemort come back! I saw the Death Eaters! I can give you their names! Lucius Malfoy —” Remus heard a very small gasp come from behind the curtain where Draco had been sleeping earlier. He was definitely awake now. Remus hoped he hadn’t been awake long enough to see Sirius in the Wing.

“This is nothing but a distraction,” Fudge said. “You are all just trying to protect Mr. Black from the consequences of his actions.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong,” Harry snarled.

“Regulus was attacked,” Dumbledore said. “For all we know he was just protecting himself.”

“Well, let’s ask him if that is the truth,” Fudge said, taking a step forward. Sirius tried to lunge at him, but McGonagall stepped in Fudge’s path before he could take a second step, her

face white with rage.

“That is enough,” McGonagall said sternly. “I will not allow you to question one of my students while he is recovering from injury.”

Fudge glared at her, and Remus thought he might sidestep her and carry on. His eyes flitted down to Sirius, who was bearing his teeth at the man. “Then he will be required at the Ministry. And I will be keeping his wand. The Aurors —”

“You can’t keep his wand, he needs it,” Harry said.

“He will have to make do,” Fudge said. “I cannot risk him endangering the rest of the students.” Fudge turned quickly and left the Hospital Wing. No one followed him.

“Mr. Potter, you should be lying down,” Madam Pomfrey said in the empty space that Fudge’s absence had left. Harry sagged slightly.

“I want to talk to Regulus first,” Harry said.

“We’ll make sure he rests right after that,” Remus said. Madam Pomfrey gave him a measured look but finally nodded.

“Both of them need to rest if they are to recover,” Madam Pomfrey said. “For Regulus, he will need to be looked over by a specialist. I have a friend at St. Mungo’s. I can call them to come in the morning.”

“That would be excellent, thank you, Poppy,” McGonagall said tenderly. The two of them left for Madam Pomfrey’s office a moment later.

“Harry, I must ask —”

“Not tonight,” Remus said quickly. “You can talk to Harry in the morning.”

Dumbledore looked like he might argue for a moment. “Very well,” he agreed. “I need to attend to the other champions. Excuse me.”

Harry watched him go, before turning toward Regulus’s bed and walking behind the curtain. Regulus was awake and watching them, his eyebrows furrowed. He could probably hear everything going on in the Hospital Wing but would have been unable to respond even if he tried to with the silencing charm in place.

“Regulus,” Harry whispered very quietly before running forward to swarm Regulus with a hug. Regulus tilted his head so that it was leaning against Harry’s shoulder, but he did not hug him back. It took Remus a moment to realize that he couldn’t. It didn’t look like Regulus could move his arms at all.

the storm.

Chapter Notes

a surprise chapter!!

cw: smut and sexual content

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It started with the dark. He was not sure if he experienced any moment of being fully gone. His final memories were a jumble of emotions that he could no longer understand. They didn't belong to him anymore. All of them spoken in a foreign language that James had never been taught. He thought he might have been gone for a while, but those memories, those moments, were stolen from him the moment the dark descended. He was not allowed to know.

James couldn't see anything, but he could feel. He wasn't sure how to describe it, but he could sense someone with him. It was like being ripped away from a nestle of safety and comfort, except that comfort came with a prison sentence and a never-ending span of emptiness. When he was ripped from it, he was jostled right into a hurricane of magical binding that he couldn't hope to understand. It was so beyond what any human man could interrupt, especially James, alone in the dark.

Through the madness that seemed infinite, he found one second of light, one guiding form.

"Regulus," he said. He hadn't spoken words in a long time, he hadn't needed to. These words were spoken without a body, without a form. He wasn't anything but wind. He was magic itself and that magic wanted Regulus to hear him.

"Regulus, please," he urged, his voice like a whisper, but without a sound.

"James," Regulus choked on his name. James couldn't quite see him, he was blinded by Regulus.

Regulus was a shepherd's light, a guiding star, and James was a man lost at sea.

He was nothing again, but somewhere, far away, he could feel the very core of his existence wrapped around something, tethering him to the world, to life.

The next moment was a memory.

"How did you find me?" Regulus asked. James remembered this moment well. He was full of righteous fury and impotent frustration that he didn't understand yet. Regulus had his back to

James. He looked like that a lot, he always had in those days.

“I have my ways,” James said without meaning to. The words existed without him, spoken through his body by another, by his past self. “I needed to speak to you.” Regulus turned to look at him, taking in his stance. He could feel the emotions in his body, but they didn’t quite belong to him. It was like being possessed.

“Are we not already speaking?” Regulus said dismissively, his eyes bored even as he looked James up and down. The first time James lived this moment, he thought Regulus was judging him. Now James knew better, Regulus was checking him out and hiding it in plain sight.

“Why were you fighting with Sirius yesterday?” James used to wish that he had a sibling before he met Sirius. The way Sirius and Regulus tore at each other made James so thankful that he was an only child.

“Because he’s annoying,” Regulus replied. “Besides, it is hardly any of your business what we fight about.”

“It’s my business when he spends all day sulking because his baby brother is being awful to him. Hasn’t he already been through enough?”

It was a low blow, and James could see the moment the words landed, Regulus tensing up, preparing for more wounds to follow. James had been so angry at him, and in those days he had nowhere to put his anger, it went flying out at anyone he thought deserved it.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Regulus spat.

“You know exactly what I mean.” James advanced toward Regulus, his legs moving without permission. He was always trying to corner Regulus as if he could lock him down simply by being too big to move around. “How could you treat him like that after what happened this summer?”

“My argument with Sirius has nothing to do with what my parents did to him. You and Sirius are exactly the same. Always quick to compare me to them,” Regulus said. At the time, James couldn’t clock the defeat in his voice, now he heard it as clear as day.

“I don’t think you’re like your parents,” James said the words with shock, not because he was surprised Regulus accused him of thinking that, but because he hadn’t realized he didn’t think that. He certainly did the first couple of years Regulus was at Hogwarts, Sirius was very sure they were all the same, but something had changed his opinion. Now Regulus stood on his own.

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter what you think anyway. Sirius sees me as the same as them.” Regulus sounded so pathetic that James wanted to laugh, his pouty lip sticking out adorably. It was a cruel response, but he couldn’t help it. He was glad that he wasn’t in control, he didn’t think this Regulus would appreciate his laughter.

James walked up to stand next to him, Regulus was looking out at the stars again, always so distracted. James would have given anything to hide those stars, he wanted to be the only

thing Regulus could see.

“Why didn’t you tell him what you did this summer? Or at least let me tell him.”

“Leave it,” Regulus said with a warning glare. James practically melted, he could never fight that look.

“Come on, Reggie. Don’t you want him to know? I mean, I hate to say this, but he probably wouldn’t be alive if you didn’t get him out.”

The memory of James discovering Regulus and a very bloody Sirius right next to his parents’ floo hit him like a runaway train. He had done what he could for Sirius, letting his mother take over the moment she found them. After that, he spent nearly an hour in the bathroom sicking up, hoping to dispel the memory of how Sirius smelled as he lay half-dead on his living room floor.

“You said you wouldn’t say anything.”

“And I won’t,” James replied. “But that doesn’t mean I agree with it.” He always resented the fact that he couldn’t tell Sirius that Regulus rescued him. Though he understood it. Not at the time, of course, he had never been the most empathetic kid, but once he was a man, he understood.

“He doesn’t need to know. It’s better that he doesn’t anyway.” That signature Regulus Black pout was back. James wanted to sink his teeth into Regulus’s lower lip and draw out one of those sharp gasps that meant Regulus had already lost control.

“So what? You’re just going to keep fighting and bickering with him every moment of the day?”

“If I must,” Regulus said. “You don’t have any siblings. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Sirius is like a brother to me.”

“And that’s exactly the problem, isn’t it?” Regulus spat. “He’d rather be your brother than mine. Listen. Just because I didn’t want Sirius to die on the floor of my father’s study, doesn’t mean that I want to be best friends with him. Besides, he’s made it more than clear that he has enough friends without me ruining it for him.”

“You both are so stubborn,” James muttered. “You would both be so much happier if you would just try and speak to one another.”

Regulus let out a long sigh. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” James said happily. He turned to leave, but as he reached the top of the stairwell, Regulus called out.

“Hey James,” he said. James turned to him with a look of bright hopefulness. “Don’t call me Reggie.”

James spent the weeks after that conversation fantasizing about Regulus running away just as Sirius did. He would lose himself in the middle of the day thinking about which room Regulus might stay in. In retrospect, it was embarrassing how long it took him to realize he was attracted to Regulus. He just thought he wanted to steal both of the Black brothers away from their family. His heart broke for his younger self, knowing that his deepest wish would never come to pass.

He existed as a magical shield for a while after that memory. He drifted here and there, pulled by some force he couldn't see or understand. The next time he was aware, he was in another memory. If this was death, then he figured it could be worse.

"We have to stop meeting like this," James purred.

James had been watching Regulus's name hover in the Astronomy tower for a few weeks at that point, every night he would look at it, waiting to see if Regulus would make the long journey up from the dungeons, and nearly every other night, Regulus would. He tried to talk himself out of going, but it wasn't ever plausible. He needed just a moment alone with Regulus, and James — the only son of parents who loved him too much to say no — was very much used to getting his way.

Tonight, Regulus avoided the Astronomy tower. Instead, he ventured out of the castle, his name dancing along the bank of the Black Lake.

"Really, James? How is it that you keep finding me?" Regulus said, turning around to see James standing in the grass.

"I just wanted to bring you this," James said, sidestepping the question. He sat down next to Regulus, their shoulders only an inch apart. James handed over a sandwich.

"You just wanted to bring me food?" Regulus asked.

"I noticed you weren't at dinner," James said simply. Regulus rolled his eyes at him. "Actually, I've noticed that you are almost never at dinner anymore."

"Stalking me now, are you?"

Yes, James thought. He was. He had been. Regulus occupied an unreasonable amount of space in James's head, and anytime he might end up in a room with Regulus, he would look for him. He always noticed when Regulus was missing.

"Not stalking," James said slowly. "Just... looking out for you."

"Why? Did Sirius put you up to this?"

"No! No, of course not," James said.

"Of course not?" Regulus said with a derisive laugh.

“Stop that,” James said firmly. Regulus looked at him in surprise. “Sirius does care about you, he’s just... he just has trouble showing it.”

James had no idea how to explain that Sirius acted far more recklessly after he and Regulus had a fight. It was like Regulus was a grounding point for Sirius, and anytime Sirius was without it, he went barreling off the edge of the Earth. Remus seemed to be the only one who could pull him back, but Remus was compromised, in the throws of coming to terms with the fact that he was dreadfully in love with Sirius.

Regulus laughed. “It’s fine, James. I’m just messing with you,” he said.

“Right,” James said, “of course.” James paused for a long moment. “So why haven’t you been at the Slytherin table then?”

“Worried about me?” Regulus replied, looking over at him. His eyes dragged along James’s shoulders, down to his crotch so quickly that James almost missed it, before they snapped back up to James’s eyes.

“And if I am?” James said. His body warmed under the attention. He didn’t understand it, his poor teenage self.

Regulus sighed. “I just haven’t felt like spending time with my fellow Slytherins much, that’s all.” James didn’t like any of Regulus’s fellow Slytherins and had no problem with Regulus keeping his distance. At the time it seemed like an in.

“But you are still eating, right?” James asked worriedly.

“Yes, James,” Regulus said. “You guys aren’t the only ones who know how to get into the kitchen.” James chuckled.

“So,” James said after a long moment of silence, “what else is new?” Regulus looked like he couldn’t help the genuine laugh that poured out of him.

“We’re going to make small talk now?” Regulus asked.

“We can talk about whatever you like,” James said. He knocked his shoulder against Regulus’s. It was a friendly gesture, but James grew half hard because of it.

“And if I don’t want to talk?” Regulus asked. He looked out at the Black Lake, avoiding James’s eyes.

“Then we can just sit here,” James replied. He knocked his shoulder against Regulus again, but this time he didn’t move away. He just let it sit there. He remembered being in so much denial about his body’s reaction.

“Okay,” Regulus replied. All Regulus had done was allow James to stay there, but James remembered being happier than he had been in months.

The storm James lived in was growing weaker. When he was very young, he was afraid of storms. His parents loved them, would open every window in the house just to hear the rain, using magic to keep out any water. They would ask James, “Don’t you love the sound?” And James would tuck his lips in and nod, pushing away the fear that always rattled him when he heard thunder.

As he grew older, he learned to appreciate the storms, but he never loved them as much as his parents did. Now that he lived in one, he finally understood the comfort that came with chaos. The comprehension of how storms lived and breathed, how he was merely a grain of sand swaying in the power of the world around him. Storms were magic, and magical storms made all the sense in the world.

That’s why when the storm grew weaker, James didn’t feel safe. He wasn’t comforted by the thought of the storm passing. Instead, he felt the weakening storm for what it was, a drag back to the dark.

Like a flash of lightning, James was in another memory.

“Come to gloat?” James asked.

He remembered this moment so intensely. It was after they had lost their first Quidditch match of the season, Slytherin was just too good that year to even begin to compete with. It didn’t help that James was horribly distracted by watching Regulus fly. Add onto that the fact that he had a very salacious dream about him the night before. James couldn’t be sure if that was the first time he realized why he was so obsessed with Regulus, that it was actually because of his ridiculous crush, but he knew that by the time that Quidditch game was finished, he would do anything to kiss Regulus Black.

“Yes,” Regulus responded with false innocence. “That was truly a pathetic display out there.”

“I’m so sorry for disappointing you.” James’s voice was husky and deep, he had never heard himself speak like that before.

“Who says I’m disappointed?” Regulus said. He moved closer like a snake slithering through the weeds. “Maybe I like watching you fail.”

“In that case, I will have to lose more often, if only to impress you.”

“You would throw away the Quidditch Cup? Just for me?” Regulus whispered.

“If you asked me to,” James replied. After that, the conversation was lost as they finally kissed. James didn’t know that they had been heading there from the start, but now that his lips were on Regulus’s, he never wanted to give it up. He would do anything to keep Regulus right where he was.

He was torn out of the memory quicker than usual as if something jettisoned him out of place.

The first time James saw Regulus naked was a week before Christmas break when they went to the Prefects' bathroom together. James had taken all his clothes off without a second thought, jumping into the water like it was an outdoor pool. He turned to see Regulus watching him, his cheeks bright red.

"Come on in," James said cheerfully. Regulus carefully took his clothes off, leaving his pants on while he walked carefully into the water. It reminded James of someone trying to force a cat to take a bath. Regulus waited until he was fully submerged in the bubbly water before stripping off his pants and throwing them off to the side.

That was the first time James had the conscious thought of, *"Oh, we're going to have sex."*

James had no idea what sex between two men was like and he couldn't very well ask anyone considering all of his friends were very certain that he was still in love with Lily Evans. They didn't have sex that day, though James might have brushed his fingers against the skin of Regulus's chest, lingering downward as he watched Regulus's flushed cheeks, his eyes dilated and focused. James had gripped one hand around Regulus's, who was already hard beneath the water, and had pulled him off while he kissed down his neck. He fantasized about that moment for days afterward.

The first time they had sex was a few weeks later. James had spent the entire Christmas holiday distracted with thoughts of Regulus, naked and flushed. Sirius kept snapping his fingers in front of James's eyes trying to bring his attention back.

"What's got you so distracted?" Remus asked, a keen look in his eye.

"Nothing," James said quickly. Remus dropped it, but Sirius kept shooting him suspicious looks all break that James did not appreciate.

He and Regulus basically collided when they met up in one of the unused classrooms that they frequented.

"I want you," James groaned against Regulus's mouth.

"Okay," Regulus responded because he was never one to over-emote.

James scrambled to take Regulus's trousers off, leaving the rest of their clothes untouched as he turned Regulus around and bent him over a dusty desk. Regulus went willingly, the air knocked from his lungs as James manhandled him.

"I've never done this before," Regulus said quietly.

"Me either," James said. He lavished his tongue along Regulus's neck causing him to whimper softly, pushing his bare skin back to grind against James's covered cock. "Hold on." James pulled back to grab his wand, casting a quick lubrication spell that he had found in a book over the holiday.

He couldn't do too much research, especially not with Sirius, Remus, and Peter around all break, but he had managed to learn a thing or two. Mostly by breaking into Sirius's trunk

while he and Remus were out on a walk and finding some very obscene muggle magazines that he was keeping in there. Sirius was such a pervert.

When James brushed his lubed-up fingers across the furled skin of Regulus's hole, Regulus jumped in surprise.

"I'm sorry," James said immediately. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No, no," Regulus said. "Keep going." It was too dark to see him, but he could hear the determination and lust in Regulus's voice. James wanted to eat him alive.

Regulus tensed when James pushed one finger in a little too quickly. James apologized again before reaching his hand around his hips so that he could close his fist around Regulus's cock. He felt like they were jumping forward a few steps, but that seemed to always be his *modus operandi*. Always jumping ahead, always pushing. But Regulus was pushing right back, caught between James's two fingers as he gasped and twitched with pleasure.

By the time James shoved his pants down just far enough to free his cock and pushed into Regulus, Regulus was so far gone that he was beyond words. He was gripping the desk so tightly that James could hear the wood creaking.

Regulus was so hot and so tight around him that he couldn't move at all for a long minute when he first entered him. There was a voice deep in his head saying over and over again, *"Oh Merlin, I'm losing my virginity. I'm having sex. I'm inside Regulus."* But James was doing his best to ignore it.

James didn't last long and neither did Regulus. The two of them collapsed into a tangle of limbs on the dusty floor, James kissing Regulus all over his face and lips for a long time afterward. Regulus was soft and pliant in his arms, so sweet that James thought he would never need to go to Honeydukes again.

Regulus left first, and James waited an entire fifteen minutes before leaving. He was immediately startled when he noticed Remus a few paces away, watching him.

"Moony, what are you doing here?" James said casually, or as casually as he could manage.

"I don't know what you're doing, James," Remus said softly, the curious look in his eyes the only indicator that he might be telling the truth. "But you should know that Sirius loves using these classrooms. You should probably find somewhere else to sneak around."

James choked on his tongue. "I don't know what you're talking about," James said swiftly.

"All the better," Remus said tiredly before walking off.

After that, they spent every intimate moment together in the Slytherin dorms. Regulus could kick his dormmates out with little to no explanation, and James would sneak in under the invisibility cloak, double-checking that he had the map on him every time so that none of the other boys would notice his name right on top of Regulus's.

That's where they were in this memory. James was spread out on top of Regulus, all his soft bare skin on display. James kept running his lips, tongue, and teeth along Regulus's collarbone, enjoying the way Regulus would squirm in his grasp. He was so responsive and so vocal despite his usually stoic nature.

"As much as I'm enjoying this," Regulus mumbled, his voice thick with lingering arousal, "I think we should probably wrap it up soon." James lifted his head to look at Regulus who was watching him with a soft smile.

"And why is that?" James asked curiously.

"Aren't you worried that someone might come in?" Regulus asked. "You know, like your very notable dormmate who just so happens to be my disowned brother?" James laughed at Regulus's snide phrasing. His lips were so distracting as he spoke, James couldn't stop himself from claiming them again.

Kissing Regulus was like taming a star, he was burned alive even as he felt Regulus fold into him. Regulus would just let James do whatever he wanted, and James had always been a selfish man. No one knew it, they all thought he was selfless, but Regulus knew the truth, and Regulus never objected.

Until he did.

"Wait," Regulus said. James froze. Regulus's tone pulled him out of his focus. "Let's at least lock the door."

James had no idea what he was talking about, his thoughts sluggish with lust. "Why didn't we lock the door?" He looked back at the dorm door. There was something off, but he wasn't sure what.

"I — I don't remember," Regulus mumbled. He kissed James gently on the lips. "But we forgot, didn't we? There was a reason we'd forgotten." James watched him for a long moment. Regulus's eyes were glazed and unfocused in a way that made James uncomfortable.

"This is strange, isn't it?" James said though he was immediately distracted by the feel of Regulus's collarbones under his fingertips.

"What?" Regulus asked.

"It feels so good to touch you," James groaned. Regulus was so warm and alive, James never wanted to move from the cradle between Regulus's legs. "I've missed you."

"Missed me? Where have I been?" Regulus asked confusedly. His face cleared for just a moment before he was kissing James again. The memories were so odd, almost like floating through a dream, but now it was like waking up. As if Regulus's lips were pulling him out of sleep with a gentle tug. It wasn't right, James realized.

"Something is wrong, right?" James said against Regulus's mouth. "Something is wrong."

“What could possibly be wrong?” Regulus asked gently, his fingers toying with James’s hair. It was distracting, so James reached up to stop him. “What?”

“Why are we here?” James asked, something finally clicking into place.

“What? In your bed?” Regulus asked with a chuckle. “I would think you would remember inviting me here.”

“No, I didn’t invite you here.”

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked, sounding miffed.

“To the dorm. I never invited you to the dorm. Why are we in the Gryffindor dorms?”

“I — I don’t remember, wasn’t Sirius busy with something? You were able to get away?”

“Right, he was sneaking to Hogsmeade with Remus. But we weren’t here, you never wanted to come here. We were in the Slytherin dorms.”

It was like every word James spoke, the dream cracked away more and more. Why would the memory be wrong? He knew it was a memory. It had to be. Otherwise, how did he get here?

“But how?” Regulus looked frustrated

“I imagined you here so many times, wrapped in my bedding, but now... it seems off.”

“James, darling, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Everything is fine,” Regulus said gently. Regulus was lost to the dream. His eyes were hazy.

“No, Regulus —”

James was ripped away again, torn into the magic that he lived in, broken away from the world as he knew it. He wished he could just relive the memories without the rest, but now that he knew the memories were wrong, he didn’t know if he should go back. He didn’t think that he had a choice.

Chapter End Notes

a james chapter finally!! and it only took 62 chapters to get here!

the doppelgänger.

Chapter Notes

i know everyone wants to know what happened between regulus and barty, but i just have to share all these little tidbits of james's pov of the scenes we have already seen him in.

After his first moment awake, James felt the shift in the magic. He didn't even realize that magic had a taste and a specific feel to it until he felt the venomous magic seep in. The magic he lived in was growing weaker, that he knew, but it took him a while to realize that something else was growing stronger in the meantime.

If he could breathe, he would be choking on it. He barely existed, and yet he could feel himself fading away. He was rattled out of the magic and into another memory like he was spontaneously apparating.

"Not all of us have the option of running away," Regulus spat. They were in the Astronomy Tower again, and James did not want to relive this memory. Why couldn't it be another memory where Regulus was docile and naked?

"I would have helped you. I can still help you," James said because he had said it before. He still meant the words. He would have helped Regulus at any time, he would help him now if he could.

"It's too late, James."

"Please don't say that. Don't say that. Reg, please, I —" James forced the words to stop flowing. The first time he lived this moment, he was gutted and destroyed. He had had all these plans for the future for him and Regulus, and then Regulus came back to school and destroyed them all. He squeezed his eyes closed, he didn't want to relive it. When he opened them a second later, a flurry of white caught his eyes. "I don't remember it snowing during this."

Regulus paused, looking out into the sky. "How odd," Regulus mumbled distractedly.

"This happened in October. Too early for snow, wasn't it?" He could still remember the way Regulus avoided him during the entire month of September, escaping every time James even got close to him. He walked forward and wrapped his arms around Regulus's body — mostly because he could, he didn't do this the first time, but he felt control over the memory. Reg was distracted for now, and if he could stop this memory from repeating, then he would do it.

“It’s so cold,” Regulus said, his teeth chattering quietly. The snow began to pick up around them as if Reg’s interpretation of the world was actively changing it. That’s what was happening, he realized. It was Regulus all along summoning these memories and causing them to change. He didn’t understand how or why.

“I don’t think these are my memories.”

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked as he turned to look at James properly.

“I thought they were mine at first, that something was happening to me to make me relive these moments. I can’t remember though. I can’t remember what was happening before, but the memories are changing, and it’s not me doing it.”

“How do you know that it isn’t you changing them?” James didn’t quite know how to explain, but he could see one piece of the world that wasn’t touching him.

“Because I’m not getting cold. Or wet for that matter.” Regulus looked him over with a confused tilt to his mouth.

“So it’s me, I’m affecting them,” Regulus said unhappily.

What’s going on? How is this happening?” James asked. Regulus stared up into his eyes, his unhappy face growing even more distressed.

“You died, James,” Regulus said quietly.

James shifted in surprise and pulled back slightly. He knew that he was gone, he knew somewhere deep within him that he had been gone, but it didn’t feel right to hear Regulus say it. Because wasn’t he dead too? The memory hit him like a wall of bricks, the sinking of pain that came with knowing that Regulus was gone from the world, Sirius sobbing on his living room floor about Regulus’s death. Regulus died before him, and then James was gone too, but now? Regulus felt alive, he felt real. It didn’t make sense to him.

“No, no please,” Regulus begged. He turned slightly as if to pull James in closer. He was shivering now. James could feel his body growing colder. He couldn’t feel the chill himself, the snow having no effect on him, but he could feel Regulus. James relented, curling his arms back around Regulus’s frame.

“What do you mean? I died?” James asked. He couldn’t actually remember dying, though he knew it was true that he was gone.

“You’re dead, you died. I don’t know how you’re here, in my dreams, maybe I’m just imagining it.”

James searched his thoughts. The memories seemed to come sluggishly. They were more powerful when Regulus was in them, or at least related to them, everything else seemed to exist beyond his grasp. It was like trying to remember a dream he’d had, hazy and jumbled. What had he been doing after Regulus's death?

He remembered the conversations he had with Lily about Regulus, the night she figured out about their failed relationship. He remembered her quiet confession of not wanting to be married anymore, the shame in her eyes. He loved her so much it ached, but it wasn't ever the way he loved Regulus. She was begging him for freedom, and he was helpless to give her anything less.

She would have left him, he remembered. She was planning to leave after the war. He remembered feeling relieved by it. He would be lonely without her, but he also knew that he never loved her the way he should love a wife. He spent so much time convincing himself that he was over Regulus, that he was only about Lily, as he should have been from the start. But he couldn't force himself to feel what he didn't feel.

He remembered being excited about her plans to travel, she would share with him the journal full of all her bucket list locations. He remembered that isolation, those last few months when not even Sirius or Remus could visit, when they were alone just the three of them. He remembered staying up late into the night, talking quietly to Regulus even though he was long dead.

Finally, the memories all clicked into place with a satisfying pop like cracking a knuckle.

"Oh, that's right. It was You-Know-Who, wasn't it? He came to kill Harry. Oh no, Harry!" He jumped back. How could he forget? Lily and Harry had run upstairs as he turned to face the monster upon their doorstep.

"He's alive," Regulus said frantically. "He survived."

"Did Lily?" James asked softly.

Regulus shook his head. "I'm sorry." James nodded. He wondered where she was — if she was gone as he had been — if she was pulled in by the magical hurricane that had become his lifeline.

"Are you dead too? I thought... I thought I remembered grieving?" James asked. He remembered grieving very well, but what if Regulus hadn't actually died? What if it had been a lie, and he'd been out there allowing James and Sirius to mourn his death? He didn't want to think that Regulus could do something so cruel.

"No, it's complicated. But no, I'm alive," Regulus said, looking away with a tight expression. James watched him silently for a moment. Clearly, he was missing something.

"How do you know what the Gryffindor dormitories look like?" James asked. If they were Regulus's dreams — Regulus's memories — then why did he know things he shouldn't? Unless he had been there.

"What?"

"We were in the dorms last time, but to my knowledge, you never visited my dorm. It seems strange that you would know what they looked like in so much detail. Or did I make them that way?"

Regulus chuckled before answering, "It's very complicated, but I'm in Gryffindor now. I spend most of the year in the dorms."

James let out a baffled laugh. How could Regulus possibly be in Gryffindor? "This is so confusing."

"I know, I'm sorry," Regulus said, sounding regretful and a little sad. His voice shook as his body shivered against the cold.

"What is happening to you, Reg?"

"I don't know," Regulus said. "I think I might be dying again."

"Again?" James asked. So he had died. His death was real.

"It's not so bad," Regulus said distractedly. "I don't think I mind as much this time. Last time, I was so afraid and so lonely, but if you're here with me, then it can't be that bad."

"No!" James shouted. Regulus's words cut him deeply, the thought of Regulus alone and afraid was like glass shattering inside him. "You can't die, why are you saying all of this?" It sounded like he was giving up, and James couldn't stand it.

"It's okay, James. I'm okay," Regulus said. Regulus was shaking so badly now that his words barely registered, coming out through clattering teeth. He was dreaming, and he was dying.

"I think... I think you need to wake up. I think you need to open your eyes."

"Why?" Regulus swayed, and it was like the environment shifted. Gone was the Astronomy Tower; instead, they were in a place James had never seen.

"Where are you?" James asked, spinning in a full circle. He had meant to say "where are we," but the sentence didn't sound right. He hadn't noticed before, with nothing to compare them to, but the other locations had felt like wallpaper, while this felt real. "I don't recognize this place."

Regulus looked around but his face didn't change. He seemed impassive and disconnected. When he looked back at James, James simply opened his arms and let Regulus fall into him. He wished he could warm him. Regulus was already shaking so badly that he didn't notice he was crying until a sob tore out of him.

"Oh, darling," James said. It had been so long, he missed calling Regulus darling. "Just open your eyes, please. Just fight. I don't want you to die."

"I miss you. I don't want to be alone anymore."

James squeezed his eyes shut. His poor Regulus, he felt like he could feel Regulus's loneliness as if it was his own. When he opened his eyes, there was someone looking at him. Or not at him. Through him. He looked like James, like a tiny version, except he had bright green eyes. He followed the boy's eyeline and found a tiny Regulus.

He gasped softly, looking back up at the boy with the green eyes. Of course. It was Harry. He couldn't believe he didn't recognize him right away. His son was now crouching over a passed-out child Regulus, lying in a puddle of water before them.

James chuckled softly. "You're not," he said. In an instant, he felt Regulus ripped from his arms. He was gone the moment Regulus left, but he knew, somewhere deep inside him, that Regulus was in that tiny body. He didn't know how — he didn't understand anything — but he knew Regulus was alive. That was enough.

The venomous magic was gone for a while. He had no sense of the passage of time in the storm, but he could feel that it was gone. The only way he knew that any time had passed was because the moment the venom was back, James was angry at himself for not enjoying the peace while he had it, like waking up with a sore throat and remembering all the easy time without the pain.

Now it wasn't just the venomous magic, now it was something else too, something that was highly interested in tearing James limb from limb. If he had limbs, that is. He didn't quite have a body when he was in the storm, he was more a mist than a corporeal being, he thought.

When he could see, it was Regulus before him. It was always Regulus.

He was lying flat on the floor of a room James couldn't see, everything that wasn't Regulus was a blur of nothing. He could see the ground beneath him though, an extremely ornate rug that looked to be about five hundred years old.

The most confusing thing was the way Regulus seemed to morph. He looked as James remembered him, nearly seventeen and about to finish his sixth year at Hogwarts, but then he would shift and suddenly he seemed much younger. The two beings seemed to blend together, flickering back and forth so quickly that he couldn't even spot it. Then both were gone and instead Regulus looked older, maybe twenty, James would guess.

He looked a bit pathetic lying on the ground as he was, but James could feel the magic around them. He knew that something was holding him down. The venomous magic was attacking him.

"Oh, darling. Not again," James said, leaning over Regulus to get a better look at him.

"Am I hallucinating?" Regulus mumbled pitifully.

"I'm not sure," James said before kneeling down to run a comforting hand through Regulus's hair. It was longer than he usually wore it, but it was soft between his fingers, and James reveled in the fact that he could feel it. "I don't think so."

"What does it feel like to you?" Regulus was losing consciousness, James could see the way his eyes kept closing against his will.

“It feels like drifting, I think,” James said, trying to parse what he was experiencing into words. “It’s not exactly clear in moments like these when things get sharp and clear again.”

“I almost got Harry killed,” Regulus said with a tragic tiny sob.

“It’s okay,” James soothed. He wished Regulus wouldn’t cry.

“No, no, you don’t understand.”

“I do. I do,” James said softly. He wanted to explain, to tell him that he knew Regulus didn’t do it on purpose. He didn’t know what happened but knew he wouldn’t hurt Harry. He didn’t get the chance though as the moment Regulus lost consciousness, James was lost as well.

Most of the time, the storm was nothing. There was chaos to it, sure, but that chaos was continuous and unchanging. It was his home, but once in a while, he would feel something tug at him. It was like a drowning pain, like his lungs — if he had them — were filling with liquid and smoke. It never lasted long and it never attached to any of his memories. It was like anxiety over forgetting something. As if he knew there was a reason he should be upset, but he had misplaced the thought about what he should be upset over.

He thought that a long time passed like that, the chaotic storm and the occasional pain. Beyond that, he was left as nothing. He was without substance. Yet at the same time, now that he knew how to recognize him, Regulus was always there. Regulus was like a lightning rod, always drawing James in, though not enough for him to strike. Never quite enough. Until it was.

“Oh, you’re back,” James said immediately. Though he really meant *oh, I’m back*, because Regulus was always there. He had a body again, even more real than most of the memories he had experienced. He leaned against the door and crossed his arms. He didn’t recognize this room, but based on the decor he would guess it was the home Sirius grew up in.

“James?” Regulus turned to look at him. He looked twenty again. James’s heart ached thinking about how he never actually got to see Regulus grow up like this.

“Has it been a long time? It feels like it’s been a while.” He wished Regulus would tell him what was going on, he felt like Regulus knew more than he was letting on.

“James,” Regulus breathed. James was across the room in a second, suddenly remembering that he could touch him, that Regulus was really there with him.

“I miss you so much.”

“I know,” James said. He didn’t miss Regulus though. How could he, when he existed just for him? He was always with Regulus, but Regulus was always alone. He ruled his back comfortingly, reveling in the feeling of Regulus sinking into him, leaning his head on his shoulder like they used to do. He could spend eternity holding him.

“You’re not really here, are you?” Regulus said miserably.

“I’m not sure exactly. I keep getting stuck places.” Sometimes when he went to explain it was like something else spoke for him. How could he explain the storm to Regulus? It would be like the moon explaining the gravitational pull of the sun, inconsequential and irrelevant to something of such power and brightness.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Peter?” Regulus suddenly snapped.

“Peter? What about him?” What did Peter have to do with anything?

“That he was the one who betrayed you, that he was a Death Eater. Why didn’t you tell me?”

James had realized the moment You-Know-Who showed up at his door that Peter had betrayed him. There was a moment of wonder and worry, thinking that perhaps something had happened to Peter, that he had been hurt, captured, or tortured. In the end, though, he knew the truth. Peter had been drifting for a long time, and James hadn’t done nearly enough to keep him safe. He had failed him, and Peter turned away.

“Oh, Peter. He was always complicated.”

“Complicated?” Regulus said sharply, yanking out of James’s arms. “He’s the reason you’re dead. He betrayed you to the Dark Lord. He’s the reason that Sirius —”

“What about Sirius?” James felt a surge of guilt. He hadn’t thought about Sirius or Remus for a long time. In the storm, nothing else mattered.

“How can you not know? I thought — I thought you knew everything I knew. I don’t understand how any of this works. Are you some kind of ghost? Are you just a figment of my imagination?” Regulus shouted, growing visibly frustrated. James wanted to consume him.

“I don’t know,” he replied calmly. “I’m sorry, Reg. I’m sorry.” He hoped the words would draw Regulus back in, that he would be able to touch and hold him again.

“Don’t call me Reg,” he said instead. James slumped as Regulus kept yelling. “Sirius spent twelve years in prison because of your *friend* Peter.”

A lot had happened since James had died. Apparently, Sirius took the fall for Peter and spent years wasting away in Azkaban. Remus had been left alone. His friends had paid the price for his death. And Harry. What had become of Harry?

“And another thing. You’re an animagus?”

James’s eyes widened. “Did Sirius tell you that?”

“He didn’t have to. I watched him drag a kid down the passageway under the Whomping Willow trying to get to Peter.” James had no idea what that meant. So Sirius was out of prison? But how? Was he finally proven innocent? Though he was apparently still after Peter?

“This is so confusing,” James said honestly.

Regulus made a growling noise that James had never heard come out of his mouth. “Peter was hiding out as Ron Weasley’s pet. Harry was in danger for three straight years, and I had no idea because you never bothered to tell me about your stupid secret ability.”

“Er, well, it wasn’t just my secret to tell.” James was doing his best to take in everything Regulus was saying, but it was all disjointed. He wished they could sit down and talk about it, that Regulus could explain everything. Or maybe not sit down, maybe lie down. Perhaps in a bed. Naked. James shook his head. He needed to focus.

“I don’t care! I wish — I know I didn’t deserve it, but I wish you would have trusted me.”

James felt like he had been stabbed. “I’m s —”

Regulus looked instantly regretful. “Just don’t. I shouldn’t have said that.” James knew he could have never made the choice to tell Regulus about his animagus form. There was far more at stake than just his secret, but his friends’ and Remus’s as well. Still, he wished he could have. He would have given anything for Regulus to know, to be included.

“Where is Sirius now?” James asked.

Regulus rolled his eyes so hard that it looked like it hurt. “Of course, that’s what you’re worried about. He’s with me at Grimmauld. Don’t worry, Lupin is taking care of him.” James breathed a sigh of relief.

“Oh, that’s good. How are they? Are they, you know?”

“Together?” Regulus asked with a raise of his eyebrow.

“You know about that?” Sirius and Remus had been incredibly secret about their relationship. So secret that neither of them even knew they were in one for the first several years. James had known they had feelings for each other for *years* before they finally officially started dating. It was truly exhausting. Honestly, everyone thought that James spent too much time pining. Little did they know, James learned from the best.

“Lupin wasn’t exactly subtle. But I’m not sure if they’re really... things are different now. Sirius still has a long way to go I think. I don’t know. I don’t really care either way.” James could hear the truth in his words. Regulus clearly cared about Sirius, he always had, but his romantic life didn’t matter to Regulus.

“Lily was always jealous of them.” He said it without thinking, the words just slipping past his lips. He didn’t even know where they came from. It wasn’t like Lily ever told him as much, but he still realized it. It was in the way she would watch them, the way her eyes tracked them in a room when they were being sweet with each other. He just knew. Regulus had never looked more hurt, though it was masked quickly behind anger.

“Right. I’d like to leave now. Is this a dream? Can I just wake up?”

When James and Lily first started dating in seventh year, James was still heartbroken over his breakup with Regulus. He had avoided even looking at the Slytherin table for weeks and weeks. Lily was a cooling balm on a terrible burn, she stitched him back together without even realizing it. They fell together slowly, though they never quite fell in love.

James could never say that he fell in love with her because he felt like he was always a tiny bit distant. There was always the fact that his heart was stretched and sheared out of his body, lingering elsewhere in the castle, with a man who wouldn't even look at him. James had moved on, and he felt good about it, he didn't need Regulus to feel any certain way about it. Not that Regulus did. He never looked at James. It hurt him every time.

He had been so stupid. He saw it now though, in that split second before the mask fell into place. Regulus had been upset by him and Lily, it should have been obvious but James was so wrapped up in his own hurt to see it back then. Now though, he could feel it in the way the magic around and within him soured slightly. It felt inhospitable. James wondered if he would disappear for good.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about my animagus form. I'm not sure if I would make a different decision now, but I'm sorry I hurt you either way." He needed to atone for something, especially if this would be his final moment. He didn't know what else to apologize for beyond his relationship with Lily, but he wouldn't say her name again if Regulus was going to make that little hurt face. He would tear himself apart before doing that.

"You don't owe me an apology, James. Whatever you did to me? I deserved it."

James didn't think he had ever heard Regulus sound so defeated. "How can you even say that?"

Regulus disappeared and in his place was himself. That was certainly different and unexpected.

"You're too late," the other James said. "You had your chance to destroy this years ago and you blew it."

"Huh?" James said.

"What?" he heard Regulus say at the same time. He looked around, but he couldn't see him. It was like he was hidden behind the other James.

"If you had been better, if you hadn't died trying to steal the locket, maybe I wouldn't have paid the price. I was murdered because you weren't good enough." The other James spoke in a dead, empty voice. James gasped at his words though, placing his hands on his hips in the way his mother used to when she was disappointed.

"I know. I'm sorry," Regulus whispered. James gasped again, but louder this time.

"Do you think I care that you're sorry? I died because of you. Lily died because of you."

"Please," Regulus begged. James huffed, irritated.

“Excuse me?” he said loudly, but the cruel James didn’t look at him. “What exactly do you think you’re doing? I would never say these things.”

The other James ignored him, he looked through him, staring down at something on the ground that James couldn’t see. James waved his hands around in front of his eyes, but they didn’t so much as blink.

“Do you know how I felt when I found out you died? Relieved. Not a day went by that I didn’t regret being with you.”

“How dare you?” James shouted. Regulus made a noise like he’d been stepped on. James, frustrated, swung out a fist to hit the other James that stood before him. However, his hand merely disappeared when it collided with the other James as if it was being sucked into him. “What?” He pulled his hand out, just to check that he could, before reaching back in. He couldn’t feel anything.

“I never wanted you,” the cruel James snarled. “You were my biggest mistake.”

“Okay, that’s quite enough of that,” James said, he sounded uncomfortably close to how his dad used to sound when he was lecturing James. Had it been any other moment, James might have felt embarrassed. He shoved forward without thinking. The other James worked like a portal, though James had no idea how. He stepped through and he could see Regulus again.

He was small now. He looked like he had when he’d been lying on the stone floor puddled in water, except now he was a bit older. Maybe thirteen or fourteen, James thought. He looked like he was drenched in pain. As if the cruel James’s words were a truth that Regulus had just been waiting for someone to confirm. James knelt down beside him.

“Don’t listen. It’s not me,” he said softly, touching Regulus’s cheek gently with the tips of his fingers.

“No one could ever want you,” the cruel James said. James turned to snap at him and finally noticed something lying on the ground. It looked like an expensive locket, and the terrible James was coming from it like a deadly smog.

“You have to destroy it,” James said, thinking out loud. It was then that he realized that Regulus wasn’t just on the ground, he was being held down on the ground by some other force. The venomous magic was back. James hadn’t noticed, he had been so distracted. “Just a little farther.”

Regulus’s resolve seemed to grow and finally, he began dragging his body forward.

“That’s it,” James cheered. “You’re so close now.” Regulus groaned in pain as he pulled himself further a bit more. He was growing visibly weaker.

“You’re pathetic. You should have stayed dead.” James was going to kill himself. Or the other James. Whatever.

“That’s enough from you, I think,” he repeated, stepping up to look at the man. He wondered if he could help Regulus. He could touch him, he could feel him, why couldn’t he touch anything else? “I think if I just…” James muttered to himself, stepping back into the smog.

“No,” Regulus groaned. James was back on the other side and now that he was paying attention, he could see the locket that the evil James was coming out of. He reached down and tried to push it but his fingers brushed right through. James shook his head and focused. Regulus was weak, he couldn’t survive like this. He had to help him. He took a deep breath in his un-living lungs and tried again. He felt the cold against his fingers, burning up through his bones.

He walked back through to see that it was right in front of Regulus. “Destroy it. You can do it,” he said softly. Regulus lifted something and brought it down hard on the object.

The moment he did the smog swarmed Regulus’s small frame, and the door of the room they were in burst open. In came a man that James didn’t recognize right away. He almost looked like Walburga. A second later he realized who it was.

“Oh… I see Sirius now,” James said faintly.

Sirius was screaming for Remus, falling to his knees next to Regulus who was losing consciousness quickly. James knew he only had a minute longer, but he took in as many details as he could of Sirius’s face. He looked much older than the last time James had seen him, and he was far too thin like he hadn’t eaten in a long, long time. But he was looking at Regulus with so much love and worry that James felt a content smile stretch across his face. As he drifted back into the storm, he felt satisfied for the first time. Regulus wasn’t alone. Not anymore.

the brotherhood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first time James Potter saw Sirius Black was on the platform when he was about to board the Hogwarts Express for the first time. Sirius's mother was fixing his shirt, brushing off invisible dust from his shoulders. Sirius stood tall — or as tall as an eleven-year-old could — and looked stern and serious. His mother looked exactly the same, her sharp features intimidating even from far away.

“Behave. Listen to your teachers. Try to have fun,” James's mother repeated for about the fourth time that morning. “And —”

“I know,” James said quietly. “If someone's alone, make sure they have a friend.” His mother smiled.

“That's right,” she said. Both of his parents were staring down at him, misty-eyed. James was a bit misty-eyed himself, though he was working hard to hide it. He tipped his chin up and hugged them both once more before boarding the train.

He found Sirius Black — though he didn't know that was his name at the time — in a compartment with a red-headed girl and a boy with straight black hair. Sirius Black, who on the platform had looked stern and stoic, now looked nervous, uncomfortable, and alone. James sat next to him and the rest was history.

The first time James Potter knew he loved Sirius Black was the second to last day of first year. They had spent all year becoming friends, best friends, but on the second to last day of school, after all their exams were finished, and they had nothing to hold their attention except exploring the castle, Sirius pulled James aside and, in a very important voice, told him all his prank ideas for second year.

“Woah,” James breathed, his voice filled with awe. “How do you remember all that?” They were in a small area of the Gryffindor common room, though it was mostly empty this time of year.

Sirius grinned in the wide, wild way that no one else could hope to mimic. “Because I'm smarter than you,” he taunted.

James scoffed, but it was ruined by the smile that was permanently fixed on his face. “You wish,” he said. “I'll probably end up with better marks than you.”

“Yeah, right!” Sirius shouted, laughing loudly. “You wish you were me, Potter.”

“Please,” James said, rolling his eyes. Sirius's smile faltered for a split second before he spoke again.

“Besides, Remus’ll probably beat us both,” he said quietly, looking over his shoulder nervously.

“Yeah, suppose he will,” James agreed. No one worked harder than Remus.

“Best not to tell him, we don’t want him to get a big head,” Sirius said.

“Yeah.” James barked a laugh. “He’s the one at risk of getting a big head.”

“Shut up!” Sirius said, his wide grin back on his face. “Now, are we going to plan these pranks or not?”

“Let me get a quill!” James shouted excitedly. He went to bed that last night thinking about how Sirius was the best friend anyone could ask for. He was practically his brother. James would do anything for him.

The first time James Potter got angry with Sirius Black was right before the Christmas holidays during their second year at Hogwarts. James was very sure that Remus Lupin was keeping a secret, and he was pretty sure that he knew what the secret was, yet Sirius kept changing the subject every time James brought it up.

“Listen, we have to talk about this,” James said solemnly.

“Talk about what?” Sirius asked, stuffing his mouth full of toast that he had stolen from the kitchens. He had been hiding out in the library, somewhere he knew James would usually almost never look for him, but James had no idea why.

“You know what,” James said.

“I think you’re crazy,” Sirius said distractedly. He was looking down at an open book on the table, but James could tell that he wasn’t reading it.

“I’m not crazy!” Someone shushed them. “I’m not crazy,” he whispered. “He disappears during every full moon and when he comes back he’s limping and tired. I looked it up. Werew —”

“Why can’t you just drop it?” Sirius shouted.

“You two! Out!” Madam Pince said suddenly, having just come careening around the corner at the sound of their voices.

“Look at what you’ve done,” Sirius said grumbly and stomped out of the library, James close at his heels.

“Well, if you’re not going to believe me, then I guess I’ll just have to ask Remus myself,” James said once they were safely in Central Hall. He hadn’t really meant the words as a threat, but Sirius must have taken them as such.

He growled and grabbed James by the front of his robes, dragging him roughly into the long corridor near the Potions classroom.

“You can’t do that,” Sirius said, shoving James so roughly against the wall that his head knocked against the stones, and his teeth clicked together.

“What is your problem?” James shouted and shoved Sirius back. Sirius was ready for it and didn’t move.

“You’re my problem,” Sirius snarled. James threw a punch, a rather good one he thought, and the next thing he knew he and Sirius were rolling around on the floor trying to hit each other.

“Er, what’s going on?” an uncertain voice cut in. They stopped rolling — James perched on top of Sirius — and looked up to see Remus and Peter looking down at them uncertainly.

“How did you find us?” Sirius asked, knocking James in the leg with his knee and forcing him to roll off to the side. Sirius jumped to his feet, quickly brushing himself off.

“I could hear you both shouting,” Remus said with an uncomfortable laugh. “What are you fighting about?”

James, who was still lying on the ground, started to stand. “We were talking about —”

Sirius spun around and kicked him *hard* in the stomach. James collapsed back on the floor, curling in on himself. Peter gasped loudly.

“Hey!” Remus shouted and yanked Sirius back.

“We weren’t talking about *anything*,” he said sharply. “Let’s go.” He grabbed Remus by the wrist and dragged him away.

“But what about — let me go, Sirius — what is happening?” Remus said, though James noticed he let himself be dragged away. He was looking back at James who was unsteadily climbing to his feet, Peter watching him nervously, and offered a small apologetic smile that James knew meant he was going to try and smooth things over with Sirius.

James had never been on the receiving end of one of those looks. Honestly, he was usually the one giving other people that look. To see it aimed at him made him grind his teeth together and clench his hands into fists.

They didn’t get another time to talk before leaving for break. James thought about approaching Remus on his own, but Sirius was always right there next to him. He was like an annoying guard dog with his sharp eyes that always seemed to track James wherever he went. James was so mad that he vowed to never talk to him again.

“What has you so worried?” his mother asked him the day before Christmas.

James shrugged. He knew he’d been sulking all break, but he couldn’t get himself to stop. “It’s nothing,” he mumbled.

“Jamie,” she said softly, rubbing a hand gently on his shoulder. “You know you can talk to me. I won’t judge.”

James sighed. “Sirius and I aren’t friends anymore.” The moment the words were out of his mouth, he broke down into tears. He told his mother everything, skillfully leaving out his suspicions about Remus, and she listened quietly, rubbing his back the entire time.

“I think you should give Sirius an opportunity to explain himself,” she said once James was left with only small pathetic sniffles. “He might surprise you.”

He didn’t want to at the time, still angry at his friend, but when he found Sirius sitting alone on the train back to school, curled up on himself and a healing bruise on his jaw, James knew he would have to hear him out. He opened the door and quietly walked in to sit across from him. Sirius looked at him for one second before staring resolutely out the window.

“Where are the others?” James asked.

Sirius shrugged. “Think Peter’s with the girls. I don’t know where Remus is.” James immediately knew he was lying, he could always tell.

James sighed. “Can we talk? Please?”

“What’s there to talk about?” Sirius asked. He was always more irritable when he first came back from breaks, it always took him a bit to get back to himself after spending time with his family.

“I’m not trying to fight,” James said. “Why do you not want to talk about what’s going on with Remus?”

“There is nothing going on with him,” Sirius said sharply. “Just leave him alone.”

It was a fatal error. Those words and the way Sirius said them, with desperation and pleading layered in his voice, caused the realization that James needed. He gasped, pointing directly at Sirius’s face.

“You already knew!” James shouted.

“Stop yelling,” Sirius hissed.

“Did he tell you? Does Peter know? Am I the last to know?” James asked the questions quickly and would have kept going if Sirius hadn’t jumped forward and covered his mouth with his hand.

“He didn’t tell me anything, and he doesn’t know that I know,” Sirius said.

James pulled Sirius’s hand away from his mouth. “And you don’t want me to mention it because?”

“I just think he would be happier if we didn’t know,” Sirius said before shrugging awkwardly.

James softened immediately. “I thought maybe you were stopping me because you...”

“Because I what?” Sirius asked.

“Because you didn’t like werewolves.”

“I’m not like my family!” Sirius shouted, jumping to his feet.

“I know that,” James said, throwing his hands up in surrender. “But what else was I supposed to think? You literally kicked me in the stomach to keep me from mentioning it.”

“Whatever, Potter,” Sirius huffed, sitting back down and crossing his arms over his chest.

They fell back into an easy friendship after that, except now James had a much deeper appreciation for Sirius. Sirius could be loud and brash, but he cared fiercely for his friends. It would be another two years before James realized why Sirius treated Remus like that.

The first time James Potter hated Sirius Black was in the middle of fifth year when Sirius decided that getting back at Snape was worth more than protecting Remus’s secret.

Remus and Sirius had been orbiting each other for months at that point, and James was pretty sure he was the only one who noticed. Merlin knew that neither Remus or Sirius were aware of it. Then Sirius did that terrible thing, and Remus was heartbroken. Sirius tried to apologize, tried to follow Remus around and trap him in rooms so the two of them could talk, but Remus was desperate to get away from him.

James had to be the one to tell Sirius to leave Remus alone. He hated that Sirius made him do that. He hated Sirius, and he didn’t think he would feel anything other than that ever again. It was the first time he really yelled at Sirius, they had fought before but it was nothing like this. Sirius didn’t fight back when James screamed at him, just stood there, pale and distant-looking.

The next few months were some of the worst of James’s life. Remus had sunken into himself and was barely alive. Peter was trying to keep them together, doing his best to make sure they all ate and finished their classwork. And James — he was just trying not to look at Sirius.

Sirius, to his credit, made it very easy. After James shouted at him, Sirius disappeared from their lives. He no longer showed his face in the dorm room or the common room. James had no idea where he was sleeping, but he didn’t let himself dwell on it. He didn’t show up for meals or in the hallways. He was barely even present in classes, coming in at the very last second and leaving the moment the class was over.

A month passed before he realized how poorly Sirius was doing. He had been so focused on not looking at him, that he had failed to see how Sirius had been swallowed by guilt, how it was tearing him apart. He was called on in one of their classes, a rare occasion those days since Sirius was dead silent in every lesson, but their Defense professor called him, and Sirius couldn’t perform the spell. Gryffindor lost five points, and Sirius slumped down in his chair even further.

That's what made James notice him, what made him really see. Sirius's long hair was stringy and unkempt. He was thinner than the last time James had seen him. James knew he hadn't been in the Great Hall, but it hadn't occurred to him that he wasn't eating at all. He felt like shit all of a sudden. He'd been so focused on his own anger and hurt that he'd failed to notice how poorly his friend was doing. Ex-friend, he mentally corrected, looking at Remus out of the corner of his eye. Remus was doing just as poorly, and it was Sirius's fault. James shouldn't feel bad.

Even with that knowledge, James couldn't stop himself from checking the map for Sirius's name multiple times a day after that. Not once did he enter the kitchens or the Great Hall, even when they weren't there. He returned to the dorm at odd times, usually waiting around the corner like he was watching them all leave, and knew he could do it without them seeing him. He slept tucked away in the common room most nights, but wouldn't arrive until well after midnight when almost everyone was in bed.

James ached for him. He hated him, he reminded himself, but it also hurt so, so badly to see him suffer. James redoubled his efforts in taking care of Remus. He hadn't been a very good friend to him, too caught up in his own feelings of betrayal to realize how much Remus was struggling. It wasn't until he started really paying attention that he realized that Remus was watching Sirius just as much, but only when he thought no one was looking.

James was at a loss for what to do, but one day, everything shifted again. One morning, James was at breakfast, Remus and Peter sitting across from him, as he gnawed slowly on a piece of sausage. He had taken to watching the door these days without even realizing it, so he noticed immediately when Sirius entered the hall.

He was staring at the ground and walking slowly like he might turn and leave at any given second. Next to him was Lily Evans. She made eye contact with James the moment she noticed him watching and lifted her chin defiantly. She grabbed Sirius by the arm and dragged him to the far end of the table, as far away as they could get from James, Remus, and Peter, and began filling Sirius's plate with food.

He didn't look at her, but he did slowly start to eat, his hands shaking slightly. Lily sat right next to him and talked to him quietly through the entire meal. James watched them closely, unable to drag his eyes away. Remus, he noticed, was watching them too, but with a look of such intense jealousy that James thought he might light them both on fire with just his eyes. That's what made James realize that he didn't feel the same jealousy. Months ago, he might have felt jealous if Sirius managed to befriend Lily, but now, he just felt relief.

Lily stayed next to Sirius for the next few weeks. She walked with him to and from classes, she sat with him at meals, and she studied with him in the library. Slowly, Sirius came back to life. He tried to do the same to Remus, but he kept finding himself wondering how Sirius was doing now that someone was watching over him. He couldn't help himself, and one afternoon, he noticed Sirius in the library alone, and Lily heading out of her dorm to meet him. James stopped her in the corridor.

"Lily," he called, trying to sound casual. She turned to look at him and instantly narrowed her eyes.

“What?” she asked.

“You and Sirius,” he said awkwardly.

“Yes?” She asked, keeping her tone light.

“You guys are friends now?” he asked.

“We are,” she replied, raising her chin in defiance like she always seemed to do these days where Sirius was concerned.

“And he...” James paused, he should have made a plan of what he was going to say before approaching her. “He’s doing okay?” he asked.

“I imagine he’s been better,” she answered, looking away. “But yes, he’s okay.”

“Good,” James said, relaxing, though his chest was still tight. “Good.”

“Is that all?” Lily asked, raising one eyebrow at him.

“Yes,” James said and Lily began to turn away before he spoke again. “I just... I was worried about him. I am worried about him.”

“You could have checked on him yourself,” Lily said, turning back to him. “I’m sure he would have appreciated feeling less alone.” James felt the guilt that had been bubbling inside him twist into a vicious snake that began crawling up his throat.

“I know, but Remus —” James choked. “Remus needs support, and what Sirius did, well it was hard on all of us, but Remus needed someone to take his side.” He needed her to understand that he wasn’t doing this because he was a bad person, he had a reason. That reason felt stupid in the face of her condemnation.

Suddenly, her shoulders dropped in acceptance. “I get it. I’m glad Remus isn’t alone.”

“Will... will you tell Sirius...” James struggled to say. “Just tell him that —”

“Potter,” she said finally, “you should just talk to him. I don’t know what he did to Remus exactly, but I think he’s punished himself enough.” Lily turned to leave, and this time James didn’t stop her.

He rushed back into his dorm, feeling like he might be sick, and closed himself up inside his bed curtains. He didn’t leave his bed for two days. Peter kept bringing him food from the kitchens, which James did his best to eat, and Remus stayed close when he could, though neither of them pried into what he was feeling.

“James,” Remus said on the third morning, James looked up at him. “You need to shower. You reek.”

James huffed a laugh. “I know,” he said, though he made no move to get up. Remus sighed.

“All right,” Remus said. “I think we need to talk about Sirius.”

James stiffened. “What about him?” Remus gave him a measured look.

“You miss him,” Remus said.

“No, I don’t,” James said instantly. “I hate him.” Remus rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“It’s okay, James. I understand. Just — just go talk to him.”

“I’m not going to do that, Remus. What he did to you was unforgivable.”

“Was it?” Peter asked. James had forgotten that he was in the room with them, he had been so quiet sitting on his bed.

“What do you mean?” James asked sharply. Peter didn’t even look shocked, just thoughtful.

“I don’t think he meant to hurt Remus. You both know how Sirius is. He acts without thinking sometimes, but he wasn’t doing it to be cruel. Not intentionally.”

“How do you know that?” Remus asked. His face was doing something odd, like he was trying to glare, but the effect was being ruined by the way his eyes were welling up.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think about it with how quiet you both have been,” Peter said logically. “I just don’t know if I would qualify what he did as unforgivable.”

“That’s not for you to decide,” James said. Peter raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Why not? It’s not like either of you are going to admit you miss him. Someone has to do it.”

Remus was quiet for a long moment. “Sirius never makes the same mistake twice,” he mumbled quietly. He was opening the door, just a crack, but that was all James needed.

“You’re right, he doesn’t,” James said. “And we don’t have to be friends with him right away. Maybe I could just talk to him. See what he says.” Remus shrugged, but James took it as permission.

“Er, James,” Peter said. James looked over at him. “You better shower before you do that.”

“Right,” James said, embarrassed.

Pulling Sirius back into his life was easier than he expected. Sirius looked like a skittish animal when James first approached him. He looked like a dog that had been scolded and left out in the cold. James hated himself a bit. Sirius was cagey and short with James, but James could tell he was just nervous.

“I think you should come back to the dorm,” James said finally.

“Remus doesn’t want me around,” Sirius said. “You were right. I was just hurting him by trying to speak to him. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Remus would have told me if that was true,” James said sternly. “Come on, let’s go back.” Sirius hesitated for only a second before following. Remus, James realized later, had just been waiting for someone else to suggest forgiving Sirius before he said anything. He realized the moment they were back in a room together that Remus had already forgiven Sirius, that he was just waiting for him to come back. Remus would have never reached out on his own, it wasn’t his way, but Peter had bridged the gap, and now Remus felt like he could.

It took a while for their friendship to recover, but time heals all wounds.

The first time James Potter was scared of Sirius Black was in sixth year after Remus told James to stop using the unused classrooms to meet up with Regulus. He didn’t know how much Remus actually knew, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask. If Remus confirmed it to his face, that meant that James would have to ask Remus to lie to Sirius for him, and he didn’t think he could do that.

So instead, James grew paranoid. Every time Sirius would say something that sounded even a little off, James was terrified that he and Regulus had been discovered. Sometimes he would have nightmares that started out as blissful dreams of him back in Regulus’s bed before Sirius would burst into the room and kill them both.

In all reality, James had no idea how Sirius would react to his relationship with Regulus, but after Sirius had been nearly killed by his parents and subsequently disowned, he had been complaining about his brother more than usual. Sirius, of course, had no idea that Regulus had risked his life, and his place in the family to save Sirius’s life, so he thought Regulus had just stood by while Sirius was punished.

The result was that James had to sit there and listen to Sirius's rant about Regulus and every bad thing he had ever done. Remus, who was very clearly tuning Sirius out, would sit there and rub Sirius’s back placatingly. They weren’t dating yet, but honestly, who did that with their friends? James was just waiting for them to realize that they were together.

Regardless, his biggest fear was that Sirius would discover James and Regulus together, and Regulus would break up with him. He was living life on the knife’s edge, and he was constantly afraid that he was going to end up bleeding out. He couldn’t help it though. He loved them both. He needed them both in his life.

The first time James Potter missed Sirius Black wasn’t until he was already long dead. James never had to miss Sirius. He got to have him the entire time. He had to miss Regulus, but that was a different story altogether.

Once he was dead, his life was only Regulus, and truly James had no complaints about that fact, but when he realized that Sirius was right there with Regulus, that Regulus and Sirius had been given a second chance at being brothers, James missed him.

After Regulus destroyed the locket, James was more firmly in the world. He had no idea how, but it was enough that he could see beyond what Regulus was doing and could venture out

from the odd memories that Regulus's mind was creating.

Regulus was unconscious for days after the locket was destroyed, so James got to watch as Sirius worried over him. Harry and Remus were there too, but seeing both of them was just painful. Remus looked far older, the years without his friends and Sirius prematurely aging him, and Harry just looked too skinny and constantly stressed. Though James wouldn't deny that he loved watching his son worry about Regulus. He wondered what Lily would think if she could see them interact.

Sirius though was the worse off of the four of them. The years in prison had done a number on his body and his mind, he was very clearly struggling, and living in his childhood home wasn't doing any favors. He was also the only one who could see James. Although, he would also see vivid hallucinations of a bunch of other people. James would constantly spot him arguing with someone that no one else could see, so when James would show up, Sirius would proceed like he was just a figment of his imagination.

James, because he had no other choice, took what he could get. He loved Sirius, and he missed Sirius. If he could spend even a few minutes with him, he would take it.

Chapter End Notes

james never shuts the fuck up smh

the curse.

As much as James Potter loved Sirius Black, he hated Barty Crouch Junior.

Okay, perhaps that was a bit of an exaggeration. Honestly, he hadn't ever had strong feelings about Barty while he was alive. There was that one moment when he noticed that Barty had grown a lot over the summer, and James felt a spark of attraction while looking at him, but beyond that, he didn't think about the man.

He never quite realized how close Barty and Regulus were. He was too busy avoiding looking at Regulus to see that happening during his seventh year. It wasn't until Regulus mentioned that he and Barty had been together before Regulus died that James decided that he hated him. He didn't know what happened to Barty, or where he was, but James started hoping that he was having a terrible day.

James didn't even realize that Barty was supposed to be dead until the day of the third task.

Regulus had been swamped with anxiety leading up to the task. James, as he became more and more real, could feel Regulus's emotions. Not that he needed to, it was painfully obvious how nervous he was. He was running himself ragged working up to it, and James was beginning to worry.

The past year had been an odd one with James existing only in the presence of Regulus. There were times when he could seek out and find Sirius, but even that was rare. In the moments when he managed it, he would be gone for days after recuperating. Not to mention that it took a physical toll on Regulus. He didn't think that Regulus noticed exactly, but James's life was tied to Regulus's, and whenever James used too much magic to find Sirius, Regulus would look more exhausted than he did the day before.

James wasn't really sure what he was exactly, all he knew was that Regulus was the reason he was there. He had no other option but to hang around and watch Regulus move through life, though he showed up when he could. That had its pros and cons though. He, of course, loved to see Regulus alive and surrounded by people who cared about him. Harry for one treated Regulus like he was one of the most important people in his life. Sirius seemed to be working overtime to repair their relationship and Remus, who had never really known Regulus, was going out of his way to watch out for him.

There were others too. Their friends who knew who Regulus really was, yet welcomed him with open arms. Like Hermione, a muggleborn girl, who reminded James a bit of Lily at that age, though Hermione was far more intense. Or Luna who, for some reason, could see James. He never had figured that bit out. Regulus didn't seem worried about it though, so he didn't dwell. James didn't think that the other girls Regulus was friends with knew who he was, but it still tickled him to see the way they latched onto him.

The cons weren't terrible, but they were still there. Alexander was a big one, the young man from another school who wanted to date Regulus. Or at least wanted to take him to the Yule Ball. James had to watch them flirt and dance, which was bad enough, but then he had to

watch them kiss too. He never wanted to relive that moment. He hadn't quite figured out how to look away yet, how to let go.

There was also the fact that James had to watch as Regulus was tormented by Moody. James had known Moody at one point, and he had never been the most stable, but now there was something very clearly wrong with him. His magic felt like sulfur smelled, and he was very intent on harassing his students. The day James watched Moody cast the Imperius Curse on Regulus was one of the worst days of his afterlife.

He wasn't sure how he did it at the time, all he knew was that he wanted it to stop and that Regulus couldn't fight off the curse on his own. He had hoped that he could just add to his power, that he could just swarm in and make him stronger. Instead, whatever James did just caused Regulus to immediately lose consciousness. It also meant that James was oddly trapped within him like their magical cores were braided together. When he pulled away, so that he could talk to Regulus again, it felt like every part of his incomplete body was being lit on fire.

So they were not all good days, but they weren't all bad either. But the day of the third task — that was a bad day.

Regulus had rushed to Moody's office to steal back the Marauder's Map that Moody had taken from Harry earlier in the year. Sirius couldn't safely come to school without Regulus stealing it back, and all Regulus had to do was take one look at Harry to decide to risk it. James wasn't totally sure about the plan, but he figured the worst that could happen would be that he was caught and given detention. In all honesty, he didn't know why Moody wasn't told that Sirius was innocent. It seemed imperative that the ex-Auror be informed.

James was hovering near Regulus as he made his way out of the classroom. He wasn't really there at the moment, he was more just in the air that surrounded Regulus, almost as if he lived in his aura.

"You were breaking into my office," Moody said. There was something odd about his voice. James felt like he could feel the magic in the room shift, but he didn't think Regulus could sense it.

"Fred and George dared me to break in, but I couldn't get past the wards," Regulus said. It was a good lie, and he sounded convincing. For anyone else, it probably would have worked, but James could see that Moody had already made up his mind about Regulus. He probably had made up his mind about him long before that moment given the way his one good eye narrowed.

Moody's face twitched. "Clever, but not clever enough." He flung a silent spell at Regulus so quickly that even James couldn't spot it. Regulus had his wand out, but he was useless against Moody who had come ready for a fight.

Regulus went flying into the desks behind him. James could feel the physical pain of his back clattering against the wood, deep bruises already forming. Regulus tried to throw a spell back at Moody, but Moody blocked it and disarmed him easily, moving his wand almost as an afterthought.

“You always thought you were the smartest in the room,” Moody growled, the words spoken so low that James almost couldn’t make them out. Regulus tried to climb to his feet, but Moody hit him with another spell. James wasn’t sure what it was, but he could feel a burning sensation spreading up his arm, like someone had just injected him with poison that ate away at his flesh.

“Ah!” Regulus shouted, cradling his arm against his chest.

“Reg, get up,” James said quickly, pulling himself from the aura so that Regulus could see him. “You have to get out of here.” He realized only a second after he said the words that they were useless, obviously, Regulus knew they had to escape Moody.

“Did you know that I —” Moody started to say before he choked on the words. He shifted his head around in a way that reminded James a bit of a snake. A boil formed on the side of his face then skittered across like an insect running under his skin.

“Regulus, now, you need to get up now,” James said urgently. Regulus stumbled to his feet finally, his eyes glued to Moody who seemed to be struggling to remain standing, his entire body vibrating.

Regulus gave Moody a wide berth as he jogged toward the door, still cradling his arm. “Fuck,” Regulus hissed.

“What?” James said, appearing next to him. He wasn’t moving consciously, he had to work to do that, instead, he was just letting Regulus drag him around.

“The door — he’s locked it. I can’t get out without my wand,” Regulus said frantically. James turned to look at Moody who was now ripping off his magical eye while grunting in pain. It was grotesque to witness, his skin bubbling and shifting.

“Oh no,” Regulus said quietly.

“What’s happening to him?”

“That’s not Moody. He’s been drinking Polyjuice. Fuck, I’m so stupid. Snape mentioned — I should have realized,” Regulus said.

James was having trouble following the words, but there were more urgent things, like who Moody actually was. “Maybe the window? Could you get out that way?”

“We’re way too high off the ground, I wouldn’t survive that jump,” Regulus whispered.

“What if your magic just kicked in and saved you?”

“Please,” Regulus said dismissively.

“Who are you talking to?” Moody growled before falling heavily into a chair. His body was slowly going through its final metamorphosis. James watched in horror, unsure of what to do. He didn’t know where Regulus’s wand was, but he was pretty sure Moody — or whoever it was — had stuffed it in his jacket.

Regulus edged around the room, looking for something to use as a weapon. James stayed close to him because it was all he could do. James heard the sound of Moody's wooden leg clattering to the floor before silence filled the space. Finally, Moody had stopped shifting around, and James was able to look at him. He didn't recognize him right away, but Regulus did.

"Barty?" Regulus breathed, dropping whatever he was holding and taking two long steps forward.

"Reg, stop," James said in a panic, though his eyes were focused on the man's face. Barty. Barty Crouch Junior. The man that Regulus had gone to when he and James had broken up. The thought made him feel sick. He had always been a possessive person, though he tried hard not to act on it, but sometimes it just overwhelmed him.

"I thought — the *Prophet* — I thought you were dead," Regulus said, taking another step toward Barty as if he hadn't just attacked him and thrown him across the room.

"I guess I wasn't the only one then," Barty snarled, jumping to his feet and pointing his wand right at Regulus's face. Regulus flinched.

"What?" Regulus breathed.

"It took me a bit to figure it out," Barty said. "But you didn't work hard enough to hide it."

Regulus's face paled, and he staggered back a step. "Why are you here?" he asked softly.

"I looked for you. Did you know that? I looked for you for months. Even after they said you were dead. I thought there was no way you could have betrayed the Dark Lord."

"Barty," Regulus said quietly.

"Not weak little Regulus." Regulus flinched again. "There is no way he could have done that. No way that he could have left me there. Alone."

"I didn't —"

"But you did, didn't you? You never even died."

"I did die," Regulus said, his voice growing sharper. He looked angry, but James could feel the fear and unease building inside him.

"And look what's become of you. What was it? A de-aging option? I've read about them before, but I didn't think they were real."

"Barty!" Regulus yelled. "Why are you here?"

"The Dark Lord sent me," Barty said with a cruel twist of his mouth. Regulus took another step back.

"No," Regulus said. "That's impossible."

“He wanted your boy,” Barty said. James felt the way Regulus spasmed, though he was clearly trying to maintain control.

“My?”

“Harry,” Barty snapped. It seemed to take Regulus a long minute to process what Barty had just said. James himself was struggling to understand it. Barty had come for Harry. He had pretended to be Moody for months just to get to Harry. Regulus had been right, someone had entered him in the tournament to hurt him.

“If you touch him —” Regulus started to say.

“It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?” Barty said, pulling up his sleeve to show his Dark Mark. “Can’t you feel him?”

Regulus growled, and in the moment that Barty wasn’t pointing his wand at him, charged forward. He used his good arm to grab at Barty’s wand. James stood uselessly to the side unsure of how to help or what to do. Regulus just about got it, he just about managed to steal it, but Barty was bigger and stronger, he was faster.

He shot a spell at Regulus that caused him to stagger backward. “Traitor!” he yelled, his wand hand shaking slightly.

“I’m not —” Regulus said, trying to regain his footing, but it was too late.

“*Crucio*,” Barty whispered the word like it hurt him to say it, he didn’t even look angry. He looked hurt.

James didn’t feel the pain right away. He felt like he was watching in slow motion as Regulus crumbled to the ground, his screaming tearing out of his throat. For James it wasn’t immediate, instead, it was like touching something that was so hot that it felt cold at first. The pain came a moment later.

It was excruciating, but he knew that he was only feeling a fraction of what Regulus was experiencing. All of the feelings he got from Regulus came through like sound underwater, distorted and slow. Yet James was completely incapacitated by the pain. He couldn’t even imagine how Regulus was feeling.

Despite the sensation of his skin tearing from his bones, the worst part about it was the way Regulus screamed. It seemed to rip through James. He was on his hands and knees, though his form was fading. It was like Regulus was growing weaker, and James’s ability to appear was going with it.

He looked back over at Barty who looked like a madman, disconnected from the pain he was causing. The only indication of hatred was the slight curl to his top lip, a look of disdain that James would never forget. He had to stop him. He had to do something. Barty wasn’t lifting the spell.

James had to use every ounce of willpower that he had to move to Regulus's side. Regulus's eyes were open, but he couldn't see James. James didn't know if it was because of the spell or if James was no longer showing up. At first, James hoped that he could help Regulus in the same way he did with the Imperius Curse. Of course, that meant that Regulus would just be unconscious and at the complete mercy of Barty.

He had to come up with something else, but he didn't know what. The pain made it so he could barely think clearly. He brushed his fingers against Regulus's face hoping to provide some semblance of comfort. Regulus's eyes seemed to focus on him for a second when he felt the touch — storm clouds right before they burst — before they rolled back in his head.

It was then that James felt it. Magic. Before he had just been in the magic, but now he realized it was just Regulus's magic. He existed only because Regulus existed. He merely orbited him. But as Regulus suffered, as he was cracked open by the damaging Unforgivable curse, his magic seemed to escape, flowing out and wrapping around James like a shield. Like a weapon.

He felt the moment Regulus lost consciousness, the curse too much for his young body to bear. The pain for James ended almost completely, though Barty didn't lift the spell. He just held it on Regulus's unmoving body, attacking him and no doubt doing extensive damage. It didn't even appear to affect Barty. James had no idea how it couldn't. He had never cast an Unforgivable, but he couldn't imagine that it was easy.

Really, he thought that Barty cared about Regulus. How could he do something like this to him? And Harry. Where was Harry? Did Voldemort have him? James was useless. He couldn't do anything to help any of them. And worse than that, if Regulus survived this he would blame himself. *If* he survived, he thought again. James couldn't let that happen, he couldn't let him die.

The magic, Regulus's magic, he could feel it, and now that the pain was gone, he could wield it.

James had never cast an Unforgivable. He hadn't ever needed to. But he had already let this go on too long and without his help, Regulus wouldn't survive. He wondered if he could cast one now, in his moment of desperation.

Luckily, or unluckily, the decision was taken from him. He couldn't cast spells even with this magic, but he could feel that it would respond to him, that it would do what he asked, what he wanted. James stood, or he hovered, he couldn't be sure. All he knew was that he was face to face with Barty.

He planned to use the magic to stop him, to knock him out, to distract him, but the moment he stretched out a hand, Regulus regained consciousness. He woke up, and the pain from the Cruciatus Curse flooded back into his body. It swelled in James and in the magic that existed between them. All that pain and fear expanded the effects, he was sure of it. That was the only explanation for the way it reacted to his desire to stop Barty.

Barty shouted in distress, dropping his wand and looking down at his chest. He had only a moment to understand that something was very wrong, only a second to realize he was about

to die. James wanted to stop him, and he did. Regulus grunted in pain as his magic was used to tear open Barty's chest, blood splattering across the desks and chairs. It would have been all over James's face had he been real.

The power behind it — the damage it did — caused Regulus to lose his last shred of energy. His body had been severely weakened from the curse, and now his magic had been ripped from him to kill someone. Regulus's head fell heavily against the ground, and James had only a second to look at him before the magic weakened too much, and he was gone.

the fight.

Chapter Notes

sorry in advance

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Before Barty, James could never figure out how to let go on command. He would come and go, drifting in and out of existence like a fish drifts through streams of water, but he didn't have control over it. And if he was present, he couldn't look away.

After Barty, James couldn't figure out how to hold on. Everything came in flashes, James would try to grip them, try to dig his proverbial nails in and stay, but he was always dragged away.

He witnessed Regulus in the Hospital Wing surrounded by Harry, Remus, and Sirius. He wasn't moving, but the sharp anxiety that surged through him felt like an attack. Something terrible had happened, and Regulus was worried about it.

The next moment it was Regulus sitting in the same hospital bed, but it was daytime, and the room was empty except for Snape who was slowly pouring a potion into Regulus's mouth. James would have rolled his eyes if he could.

Regulus and Snape were talking about something, but the words were muffled and indistinguishable. Snape stood up to leave and finally, a few of Regulus's words came through.

"He was my — he used to be my friend," he said roughly. James could feel the way his throat ached like he might start crying. Snape didn't respond, only looked on dispassionately. After a moment, Snape placed a firm hand on Regulus's shoulder. Regulus squeezed his eyes closed. James was swept away right as the feeling of hurt overcame him.

He witnessed Regulus walking into the Ministry. James could feel the licks of pain shooting down his back and legs as he moved. His walk was slow and wobbly, but Remus was right next to him, his arm discreetly tucked under Regulus's to help him stay standing. Regulus was worried about something again, but James didn't get to stay long enough to know what it was.

He thought the next moment might have been Regulus's birthday. He was sitting in a wide wingback chair surrounded by presents. He had a quiet smile on his face, and to any outsider, he looked content, but James could feel his emotions. Inside there was a yawning loneliness that was taking over, burrowing its way out of Regulus and making a home on the surface.

Someone handed him another gift, James couldn't see who it was, but Regulus opened it slowly. His hands were shaking, but the pain wasn't that overwhelming. In the wrapping paper were three books that were tied together with a small pink ribbon. Regulus laughed when he read the titles, his cheeks blazing with good-natured embarrassment. The smile on his face didn't touch his eyes.

Regulus was at dinner the next time he saw him. It took him a few seconds to realize that the room must have been at Grimmauld. It was the most present that James had felt since Barty's death. He could make out the rest of the room and all its occupants. And there were *so many* occupants.

Regulus was sitting between Harry and Hermione, though he wasn't speaking to either of them. He was quietly contemplating all of the other people at the table with him, looking at each of them in turn, the feeling of loneliness only growing with every person.

Harry and Ron were caught up in a lively conversation with a pair of twins that James didn't know. A red-headed girl was listening to them, her eyes lingering on Harry's face. It was sweet, the way she watched him. However, James wondered if he was the only one who noticed the way her gaze flicked over to another woman sitting a few seats down every couple of minutes.

James had never seen the woman before. She had bright violet hair that was cropped short so that it stuck up in a spiky hairstyle. She was talking excitedly to Remus, a light blush on her cheeks and a twinkling in her eyes. Remus was listening attentively, nodding along with whatever she was talking about. *Oh no*, James thought. He immediately searched around for Sirius.

Sirius was sitting at the head of the table, looking forlorn and irritated in equal measure as he watched Remus and the woman speak. His hands were tucked under the table, but James could see the way he was fidgeting restlessly, dark circles under his eyes. He looked like he hadn't eaten properly in weeks.

There were others too, a whole hoard of other people that James didn't know. Regulus clearly knew them all though, and every now and then James would feel a small flash of emotion as Regulus looked at them. James wondered if Regulus would be able to see him now, he felt almost like he had before Barty, but not once did Regulus's eyes linger on his.

James blinked out of existence and blinked back a second later, except now it was to Regulus sitting on the roof of Grimmauld Place. Sirius had explained the area to him enough times for him to recognize it immediately. Harry climbed through the window to sit next to Regulus.

"Sure you don't want to come down and join us?" Harry asked, a hopeful look in his eye.

"I will in a bit," Regulus said with a small smile. Harry looked concerned.

"Want me to help you climb down?" Harry asked uncertainly. Regulus scowled, though he turned his face away so that Harry wouldn't see it.

“That’s all right,” Regulus said. Harry was quiet for a second, before he got up to leave. “Oh, before you go.”

“Yeah?” Harry said, the hopeful look was back.

“I wanted to give this to you in private. Don't show it to anyone, okay?” Regulus said, handing a book to Harry whose eyes widened. “Happy birthday.”

“Really?” Harry breathed, the smile on his face growing comically wide. James tried to get a look at the book, dead curious about what it could be, but he drifted away before he could see it.

James came right into an argument the next time.

“I want to visit them. It’s not fair that I’ve never gotten to,” Harry said sharply. Regulus was sitting on the couch nearby, rubbing his eyes tiredly. Sirius was frowning at Harry.

“I know that —” Sirius said.

“It’s just not safe Harry,” Remus cut in.

“It’s never going to be safe at this rate,” Harry shouted. His eyes were bloodshot like he hadn’t slept well. The scar on his forehead was inflamed making it look like he was bleeding.

“It will be,” Remus assured. “One day it will be perfectly safe.”

“Oh, safe like the years you spent pretending Voldemort wasn’t alive anymore?” Harry said. Regulus didn’t flinch, but his nerves seemed to light on fire for a second upon hearing the name. He gasped in pain, though it was very quiet.

“Harry, now is not the right time,” Sirius said. “Let’s at least wait to see what Dumbledore says.”

“Of course,” Harry said petulantly, stomping out of the room.

“He’s not going to let this go,” Sirius said softly. His eyes lingered on Remus’s face, but Remus wasn’t looking at him. James’s heart hurt watching them. Regulus just looked tired.

“Please, Regulus. We’ll be careful. I’ll stay under the cloak. Come on, just for an hour,” Harry said. James hadn’t even realized that he’d drifted, but he was in a different moment now. Harry and Regulus were talking in a bedroom.

“I’m not strong enough to protect you on my own,” Regulus said, a thick layer of shame dusting over his skin.

“No one is going to spot us,” Harry argued. “You won’t even need to protect me.”

James didn't know what they were talking about, but he was inclined to agree with Remus and Sirius if they said it wasn’t safe. Still, Harry was very hard to say no to. James finally

understood why his parents were so inclined to give in to almost every whim he had when James was a child. Harry asking for something was like someone trying to carve out your organs one by one, the pain of denial too intense to bear. He didn't think he would be able to say no, so he didn't blame Regulus when he sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Just for an hour," Regulus said.

"Yes!" Harry whisper-shouted.

It took James a long moment to figure out where they were the next time he saw them. It's odd to look at them through the invisibility cloak. Regulus was clear as day, but Harry looked like a wraith floating in the space beside Reg. James glanced around as their surroundings came into focus. They were in a graveyard.

Oh. Coming face to face with his own headstone had not been what he was expecting. James Potter and Lily Potter, a couple doomed to fail sharing a gravestone for the rest of eternity. It felt a bit like being mocked. James wondered if seeing Lily's name hurt Regulus. If it had been Regulus and Barty's grave, he would have been hurt.

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," Harry said quietly. "Isn't that a Death Easter idea? Why is that there?" Harry's voice grew vaguely frantic as he spoke. Regulus shook his head.

"No, I don't think so," Regulus said quietly. "I think it means living after death." His face twisted as he said it, a frown tugging at his lips. That lonely feeling was back, gnawing and all-consuming for a moment. James was so busy looking at his face, feeling his pain, that he almost missed the way Regulus started to feel sick.

Harry shivered suddenly. "Bit cold for August, isn't it?" Harry said. Regulus tore his eyes away from the gravestone, and his face instantly paled.

"What is that?" he breathed, though they all knew what it was. A huge, hooded figure was gliding toward them, floating right above the ground, weaving between gravestones. Pain flared in Regulus's body, his knees buckling. "Harry, run!"

James didn't see what happened next. This time as he was ripped from existence, it felt like someone was trying to skin him alive.

"I cannot believe you! You knew how dangerous it was." Sirius was yelling, his voice sharp with anger and deeply buried worry. Regulus was sitting on a bed, the pain in his body worse than it had been all summer.

"I know," he replied weakly.

"Do you? Do you know? Because we already discussed this, but you went behind our backs to lead Harry directly into danger. You're barely strong enough to walk, let alone perform magic."

"I'm sorry," Regulus voice was rough.

“You both could have been killed or worse!” Sirius shouted. Regulus flinched.

“Sirius, I think that’s enough,” Remus said, slipping into the room. Sirius sneered at him so viciously that Remus visibly recoiled before Sirius turned back to Regulus.

“If Harry gets expelled because of this, it’s your fault,” Sirius snapped.

“I know,” Regulus repeated softly, closing his eyes in pain.

“Get out of my way,” Sirius snarled at Remus, shoving passed him to storm out of the bedroom, slamming the door behind him. Remus watched him go with an indecipherable look on his face, he turned to stare at Regulus a second later.

He gave Regulus a long look, though Regulus still had his eyes closed and couldn’t see him. “Do you need a pain draught?” he asked.

“No,” Regulus said through clenched teeth. It was obvious that he was lying, it would have been even if James wasn’t experiencing the pain Regulus was feeling.

“Sirius will —“

“Just leave it, Lupin,” Regulus said. “I doubt you’re the expert on Sirius.”

Remus froze for a second. “What do you mean?” Regulus rubbed his eyes with one hand before dropping it to glare at Remus. The anger Regulus was feeling was suddenly overwhelming.

“I’ve never liked the way you abandoned Harry,” Regulus said, his voice deadly calm. “But I understood that you didn’t do it on purpose. I knew you were suffering. I never thought you were cruel. But now...”

Remus’s face twitched dangerously. “Now?”

“Perhaps you should consider courting my cousin somewhere other than the house where my brother lives,” Regulus said cuttingly. The words landed like a hailstorm, just as Regulus intended them to.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Remus said, though he looked vaguely haunted.

“Of course, you don’t,” Regulus said with a dismissive smirk. It didn’t touch his eyes, but the cruelty was clear as day. James wanted to yell, to tell Remus not to trust it, to tell him that Regulus was just lashing out because he was angry with himself and in so much pain that he could barely think straight. He couldn’t warn him though, and Remus reacted as emotionally as James, and Regulus, expected him to.

“You should be careful, Black,” he snapped. “I’m not the only one who’s been cruel to Sirius.”

Regulus’s eyes narrowed. “If you’re talking about when we were kids —”

“No,” Remus said, a feral glint in his eyes. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Sixth year, wasn’t it? Or I guess it was fifth year for you.”

The room seemed to freeze. Regulus’s eyes widened for only a split second before his face settled into an empty mask. Remus just stared back looking equal parts horrified and triumphant. As James was swept away, he audibly shouted. He desperately wanted to know how that conversation was going to end. He should have realized that Remus knew. He knew this entire time, and he never said anything, though James had no idea why not.

“You’re not mad at me too, are you?” Harry asked moodily. He was sitting cross-legged on a bed, picking distractedly at his pajama bottoms.

Regulus sighed, he was leaning heavily against the doorframe. James could feel the way his legs ached. “Harry, of course, I’m not angry with you. It was my fault.”

Harry gave a very put-upon sigh. “No, it wasn’t. I shouldn’t have convinced you to go.”

“I shouldn’t have been convinced,” Regulus said with a small chuckle. “Honestly, we could do this all night. Let’s call it even, yeah?” He sighed again, this one laced with pain. Harry must have grown accustomed to the noise.

“Do you want to sit?” Harry asked. Regulus shook his head.

“I’m fine,” he responded. Harry didn’t look satisfied, but he didn’t argue. He looked away distracted for another long moment and neither of them spoke.

“If they do expel me —”

“They won’t,” Regulus said swiftly. Harry looked up for only a second before looking away again.

“But if they do. Can I still come back and live with you?”

“Harry,” Regulus said softly. “Of course.”

“They’ll snap my wand,” Harry said sullenly. He looked like he was working hard not to spiral.

“If they do that, then we will get you a new one, just like Lupin did for Sirius. Then I’ll teach you myself, okay?”

Harry smiled slightly and finally relaxed. “Thanks, Reg.”

Regulus smiled at him before leaving to slowly walk to his own bedroom. The moment he was alone, the aching loneliness was back. It had been there for weeks, only growing worse as the days passed. Regulus sat down heavily on the bed, rubbing his legs as if to warm them.

It was the first moment of quiet contemplation that James had since Barty’s death, but now that he had a second to really think about how Regulus had been feeling, he saw something

that he hadn't before. The loneliness that Regulus was battling had been there for a long time, but it had grown worse. It seemed to consume him now, any second that his thoughts got away from him, his loneliness crashed into him like a violent wave.

All James wanted was for Regulus to be surrounded by people who loved him, and he was. Even with the fight with Sirius, and the argument with Remus, there were still people who cared about what happened to Regulus. Yet that loneliness persisted. If anything, it seemed to be getting worse. James wished he could fix it, he wished he could settle into his life and cradle Regulus in his arms. He wished he could heal all the gaping loneliness, sealing it up so that it could never hurt him again.

He would never be able to though. He was dead. He was gone. Though he lingered here, imprisoned in this middle ground, tied to Regulus and his magic, he wasn't really here. And he never would be.

James was in limbo, and he was keeping Regulus there with him. He was trapping him without even realizing it, and unless he did something, the loneliness would get worse and worse until all Regulus had was James, a dead man anchoring to a half-life.

Regulus gasped. James hadn't noticed that he was looking at him. "You're back," Regulus said, he smiled softly. He was so beautiful, those glittering eyes and dark curls. James wanted to cry.

"I am," James said stiffly. Regulus's smile faltered.

"What happened? I haven't seen you in so long. Not since —" Regulus said, he tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't hold him anymore.

"Not since Barty," James said. He wanted to go to him, to touch his hand, to hold him. He didn't let himself move.

"Right," Regulus said faintly. "What — how — what happened exactly?"

James sighed. "He was going to kill you," James said. "I had to stop him. I didn't mean to kill him."

Regulus nodded stiltedly, looking down at his hands for a moment. "Thank you."

James grimaced slightly, though he wasn't sure if Regulus noticed. "I'm sorry that happened. How have you been since..." he trailed off.

Regulus shrugged. "Fine. A bit of pain." That was an understatement. "And my magic was a little damaged afterward, but I'll make a full recovery." James had no idea if that was true. He hoped it was.

"What's been going on since then?" James asked, edging the conversation in the direction he needed it to go. The look of shame that crossed Regulus's face was so potent that it made James feel a bit sick.

“Have you seen anything?” Regulus asked, appearing a bit like a child who was holding a stolen piece of candy behind their back.

James shrugged. “A few things,” he replied. Regulus nodded.

“I made a stupid mistake,” Regulus muttered. “Harry and I were attacked by dementors.”

“Are you both okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” Regulus responded quickly before hesitating. “Thanks to Harry. I wasn’t able to — I can’t cast the Patronus Charm.”

James sighed so quietly that Regulus couldn’t hear him. The in he needed it. He didn’t want it. “Why not?”

Regulus shrugged again. “I’ve just never been able to.” James understood what Regulus wasn’t saying, that he never had a happy enough memory to summon a Patronus. Sirius had had a similar problem when they were young, it took him a long time to cast one, though he eventually managed.

Regulus clearly hadn’t had the same encouragement that Sirius had. James squeezed his eyes shut for a second. He thought about Regulus that night when the two of them watched Harry surrounded by his friends after the first task. “He’s all you,” Regulus had said with a sad little smile.

“No, no, he’s not,” James had responded thoughtlessly. At the time, he had been thinking about how much like Regulus Harry was. Almost as if Regulus himself had raised him. He could see so much of him in the way Harry talked and acted. He didn’t realize until later how Regulus had taken his statement. He thought he meant Lily, and that idea wounded him deeply. And now here was James, preparing to rub salt in that wound.

“It’s all about finding your happiest memory. Or your most content,” James said. Regulus rolled his eyes like he was about to say something, but James forged on. “For me, it was Lily.”

Regulus froze, staring at James like a wounded animal. He didn’t even have time to remember to hide his emotions before James continued.

“Before Lily, I never really had a memory that was happy enough. Sure there was stuff with my parents and my friends, but Lily was really the reason I was able to cast one.” That was a lie. James had figured out how to cast one shortly before he and Regulus began dating, using the memory of becoming an animagus to conjure one.

“Oh,” Regulus breathed. James could feel Regulus’s pain, the way it mixed in with his own, creating a dangerous concoction of suffering that he had never experienced before.

“Did you know that she had a similar Patronus to me? Mine’s a stag, her’s was a doe. My mother said that meant we were soulmates,” James said. He looked away, trying to appear wistful, mostly he was trying to keep hold of his emotions. In truth, his mother said nothing

of the sort. What she actually said was, “Just because you think she’s meant for you, doesn't mean you own her.”

Regulus didn’t respond. He was still frozen on his bed, the pain in his limbs growing by the second. James wasn't just causing him emotional pain, he was physically hurting him, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Honestly, I don’t think I was satisfied until I was with her. Before we got together, I always just felt so... empty.”

“I didn’t realize you felt like that,” Regulus said, the words seemed to cost him a great deal.

“You never asked,” James said even though it wasn’t fair at all. Regulus wasn’t one to ask questions like that, but it didn’t mean he didn’t care. James knew this fact well. Still, he could see the way something cracked behind Regulus’s eyes.

“Right,” Regulus said, swallowing harshly.

James didn’t know what he would say next, if he would yell or say something cruel, if he would turn mean. Or if he would call James out on his lie, if he would fight him on it, tell him that he knew the truth of how James felt about him. James almost wished he would do that, he wished Regulus would give him an excuse to stay. He figured anything was possible.

Instead of that, Regulus just clenched his jaw and looked away. “I think you should leave,” he said.

“What?” James said stupidly as if he hadn’t been pushing for this.

“I don't want you here,” Regulus said. “I don't want to see you anymore.”

James waited a moment to see if Regulus would turn back to look at him one final time. He didn’t though. Regulus was looking resolutely the other way. James nodded, even though he couldn't be seen. He didn't say anything else.

James hadn’t known how to look away before, and then he hadn’t known how to hang on. He knew how to do both now, he understood it all. That’s why he was able to let go, to really let go, to drift off into Regulus’s magic, back into the storm where he was formed.

James let go, and he didn’t feel anything for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

so the original plan for this chapter was to have it all from regulus's point of view, but i realized that that might be perhaps a bit too cruel given the content.

the toad.

Regulus's bones ached on the walk to the Hogwarts Express. They'd been hurting all summer, but they hurt especially bad today. Harry kept close to him, watching the way he walked to check in and see if he might fall over randomly. Regulus wanted to be annoyed by it, he hated feeling so helpless, but mostly he was glad for Harry's presence.

"Should we go and find a compartment, then?" Harry asked just as Fred and George left them to trail after their friend Lee, mentioning something about 'business' that they had to deal with. Regulus wasn't about to ask about it, it was bad enough that they were building it off all the money he had given them last year. No wonder Molly didn't like him. Harry had also given them his winnings from the Triwizard Tournament as an investment, but Molly seemed to brush right over that fact.

"Er. Well, Ron and I —" Hermione started to say, looking supremely uncomfortable, as she had many times over the past week.

"They have to meet up with the other prefects," Regulus said. Hermione looked grateful like she didn't want to mention it herself. She probably didn't given how upset Harry had been that he was looked over for the role.

"Oh, right," Harry said with a slight frown. Ron was looking away like something out the window was terribly interesting.

"Let's see if we can find Luna and Neville," he said, already heading away from Ron and Hermione. Harry kept speaking with them for a second before following.

"Hermione's upset that Padfoot came with us, says that he shouldn't have risked it," Harry complained as they walked. He should have expected that, over the summer, she'd grown very annoyed with Sirius.

Regulus shrugged. "She might be right, but I'm not sure that we could have stopped him." Sirius had always been impulsive and strong-willed, though that was only growing worse by the day.

Harry was quiet for a second. "Are he and Remus fighting?"

"Yes," Regulus answered honestly. He had vowed not to lie to Harry when he didn't have to. They maneuvered around a bunch of students who were loitering outside of one carriage, a group of them stuffed inside, all of them surrounding the smallest Puffskein that Regulus had ever seen.

"Why?" Harry asked once they were clear of the group.

"They're always fighting," Regulus mumbled. "But I'm pretty sure it's about Tonks this time."

“Sirius doesn’t seem to like her,” Harry said quietly. Regulus burst out laughing against his will. That was putting it lightly.

“No, I can’t imagine that he does.”

“But you both are related to her, right? I mean, you’re family. Shouldn’t you get along?”

“You are related to the Dursleys, do you get along with them?”

“Well, no. But that’s different. Tonks isn’t anything like them.” Harry, like many of the teens in Grimmauld, had grown fascinated by Tonks. He didn’t blame them, she was kind and lively. She had an air about her that made it easy to approach her and talk to her, not that Regulus did himself, but he noticed the rest of them do it.

“She’s much more palatable, that’s true. Perhaps a bit too palatable for Sirius’s liking.”

Harry didn’t get a chance to respond as they arrived at the last carriage where Neville and Luna were sitting. Regulus was grateful for the interruption though, he wasn’t keen on explaining the love triangle spawning between his brother, his cousin, and Remus Lupin. It was bad enough having to witness it, especially with Lupin’s supposed knowledge about him and James.

Right after Lupin had let slip the accusation, Regulus had been distracted by the sound of far-off shouting, and by the time he looked back up, Lupin was gone and they hadn’t spoken again since. He was afraid at first that Lupin would mention it to Sirius, but for the time being, he was staying silent. Or Sirius was just avoiding Lupin, that was very possible.

“Hey guys, hey Ginny,” Neville said. Regulus had forgotten that Ginny was behind them. She had been sticking close to Harry all summer.

“All right, Neville?” Harry asked as they all shuffled in. “Hi, Luna.” Harry quickly stowed his trunk, grabbing Regulus’s out of his hand before Regulus could even protest. Not that he was going to, he was sure he wouldn’t be able to lift it. He slowly sat down in the seat by the window, Ginny grabbing his arm to steady him seemingly without thinking.

“Are you well, Regulus?” Luna asked, setting down her copy of *The Quibbler* to look at him.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Just a bit sore.”

“Don’t worry, Regulus. We don’t believe what they’ve been saying about you in the papers,” Neville said solemnly. “You either, Harry.”

Ah, yes, the *Prophet*. They had been quite the pest all summer. After Fudge had dismissed everything Harry had said about the Dark Lord rising again, he had focused nearly all of his energy on making Regulus out to be a murderer and depicting Harry as an insane, attention-seeker.

Harry was beyond irritated by it. He clearly felt hopeless about the situation, not to mention that he had been having nightmares all summer about his confrontation with the Dark Lord.

Sirius had taken to sleeping in Harry's room with him, curling up as Padfoot and snoring at the foot of his bed.

Regulus just felt apathetic. He didn't murder Barty, James had confirmed that, but it hardly mattered. Barty was still dead. Regulus had been brought into the Ministry several times throughout the summer for questioning, but they had yet to make any decision or claim about how he'd done it. Tonks kept telling him not to worry about it, that most of them knew he was innocent, or at the very least only killed Barty out of self-defense, but Regulus wasn't sure that he cared either way.

The Dark Lord was back, and they were no closer to finding the remaining Horcruxes. What would it matter if he was thrown in Azkaban? Most of the time, he just felt numb. After his final conversation with James, he had shut down his thoughts so thoroughly that he couldn't feel anything at all. It was better that way.

"Thanks, guys," Harry mumbled when Regulus didn't bother to respond. Regulus looked out the window as the train began pulling out of the station, letting Neville's and Harry's voices fade into the background. His mind drifted into a pleasant quiet as he watched the world around them pass by. They made it out of London quickly, and before he knew it, they were surrounded by greenery on all sides.

In retrospect, he should have paid closer attention if he didn't want to get a face full of Stinksap. He should have known better by now than to trust anything these Gryffindors would do when left to their own devices.

"Er, sorry, I've never tried that before," Neville said uncomfortably, shaking his head around to clear the Stinksap out of his eyes. It had come from the odd plant that sat in his lap, something that Regulus didn't recognize or care to learn about.

Ginny cleaned them up of the Stinksap right away, before Regulus could even pull out his wand. He wondered if he would be able to complete that spell on his own. Probably not. He drifted back into the silence of his mind, leaning his head against the window. He hadn't slept well in weeks, but last night was especially restless. Every time he drifted off even a little bit, sharp pains would shoot down from his back to the bottom of his feet and wake him up. He didn't fall asleep in the carriage, but it was a close thing.

It took a while for Ron and Hermione to show back up, with Draco arriving just a bit after for the explicit purpose of taunting Harry. Harry, as usual, rose to the bait and snapped back at him. Regulus just watched idly as they spoke, Hermione and Ron both growing angry as the argument carried on.

"I seem to have touched a nerve," Draco said with a mean smirk. "Well, just watch yourself, Potter, because I'll be *dogging* your footsteps in case you step out of line." Harry froze, Hermione already jumping to her feet to tell Draco to leave. His smirk widened just a bit more, but his eyes lingered on Regulus's for a split second before he turned to leave. There was an unsettled look there that Regulus was having trouble deciphering.

He stomped off a second later, and Regulus debated whether he should follow him. Surely the use of the word 'dogging' wasn't accidental, but did that mean that he knew about Sirius?

Perhaps Peter had told them, at least the other Death Eaters, but Draco? That seemed odd. He would have to ask Snape what he knew once he arrived at the castle.

They made it to Hogwarts without another incident, but by the time Regulus sat at the Gryffindor table, he was limping badly. He doubted he would be able to make it up to the common room on his own. It didn't help that the entire student body seemed keen on whispering about him and Harry, many of them glancing over their shoulders or openly staring at them. They would no doubt be under heavy surveillance this year.

Hagrid was missing from the professors' table, Regulus noticed, though based on the last thing Sirius had mentioned to him before they stopped speaking, he was probably still out on the mission that Dumbledore had given him. Harry, Hermione, and Ron seemed very worried though. They weren't permitted in any of the Order of the Phoenix meetings and weren't as up-to-date as Regulus was. Not that Regulus was exactly allowed in either, Dumbledore thought it would be too dangerous for that many people to know who he truly was, but he was given a run down after each gathering.

"Who is *that*?" Hermione asked sharply, pointing discreetly at the staff table. Regulus followed her finger and noticed a woman sitting right next to Dumbledore, his head inclined toward hers as she spoke in his ear. She was dressed in a bright pink cardigan that she wore over her matching robes. Regulus's stomach sank the moment he saw her.

"It's that Umbridge woman!" Harry squawked.

"Who?" Hermione asked.

"She was at my hearing, she works for Fudge," Harry explained.

Regulus had been called into Harry's hearing to act as a witness for the dementors that attacked them — not that his testimony meant much considering more than half of the ministry thought he was a murderer. Regardless, he got to witness firsthand as Umbridge, Fudge's right-hand woman, worked to ensure that Harry was expelled. Regulus wanted to tear her apart with his bare hands, though he at least felt comforted by the fact that he would never see her again after the hearing. At least, that's what he thought at the time.

"What on earth is she doing here, then?"

"The ministry passed a decree over the summer saying that they could appoint professors if Dumbledore couldn't find anyone to fill the spot," Regulus explained. "Fudge probably planted her here so that he could have some semblance of control."

"You think she's a professor? What is she going to teach?" Hermione asked though he could see from the dawning horror on her face that she already knew the answer to that question.

"It's obvious, isn't it? There is only one position that needs to be filled every year," Ron muttered.

This was bad. This was very bad. They would have to be extra careful. There was no doubt in his mind that she would be doing everything in her power to get both Harry and Regulus

expelled. He didn't much care if he was expelled, but he would need to protect Harry. They settled into a conversation about their O.W.L. year as they ate the feast, dropping the conversation about Umbridge for the time being. Regulus wasn't able to stomach much of the food, and his hands still shook slightly, making controlling a fork and knife a bit too difficult to manage in shared company.

"Who is captain of the team this year?" Neville asked.

"Angelina Johnson," Harry replied. "I'm interested to see how she runs practice."

"I think I might try out this year," Ron said with great pride. Harry smiled brightly.

"You definitely should."

"Have you thought about trying out?" Hermione asked, directing her question at Regulus. He laughed quietly.

"No," Regulus said. "I definitely won't be doing that."

"Why not?" Ginny asked keenly.

"Just doubt I would be able to beat Harry for a spot on the team," Regulus said with another laugh.

"You're a seeker then?" Neville asked. Regulus shrugged, but Harry was watching him with surprise like he had forgotten that fact.

"Not a very good one." He actually hadn't been that bad during his first life, but given the physical pain he was in, he had no desire to try out even as an alternate.

"Maybe I'll try out," Ginny said with a small smile.

By the time the food disappeared, Regulus was feeling pleasantly tired. He was looking forward to sleeping in his bed in Gryffindor Tower. He'd grown tired of his bed at home, often feeling suffocated and uncomfortable, and he was excited to get away from it. Dumbledore began his yearly announcements a moment after the food disappeared.

"We have had two changes to our staff this year. Please welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank who will be taking over Care of Magical Creatures for the time being," he said. Regulus shared a look with his friends. "We are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Dumbledore tried to continue with his announcements when he was interrupted by Umbridge clearing her throat with a high-pitched *hem, hem*. She spoke like she was trying to trick little kids into jumping into an oven, her voice like nails on a chalkboard. Regulus hated her.

"I'll be her friend as long as I don't have to borrow that cardigan," Pavarti whispered to Lavender as Umbridge spoke, both of them falling into silent laughs that made Regulus's lips twitch into a small smile.

He found that he missed how lighthearted both of them could be, even in the face of something awful. During the summer, he had exchanged letters with both of them. They were very interested in his recovery, though they didn't know the full details about what had happened to him. They even sent him a new stack of romance novels for his birthday, a gift that kept him going in the lonely summer months.

Umbridge talked for a long time, mincing words and dancing around the subject matter that she was clearly intent on actually discussing. Regulus wondered if the rest of the student body was following what she wasn't actually saying.

"Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited," she said before finally sitting down.

It reminded Regulus of the way his mother used to speak at family gatherings, often going on long tangents about "protecting tradition" and "ensuring that wizarding society was not tainted by those who do not understand it." He never really understood what that meant, not until it was far too late for him. Sirius somehow figured out that it was wrong, but Regulus had missed that train. That, or he was just too complacent to question the words coming out of his family's mouths.

"Yes, that was certainly illuminating," Hermione grumbled, her eyebrows furrowed in a scowl.

"You're not telling me you enjoyed it?" Ron asked.

"No," Regulus said. "She's saying that Umbridge just revealed her cards. She was speaking directly to those who already agree with her."

"What does that mean?"

"Progress for progress's sake must be discouraged?" Hermione repeated. "Pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited?" She said the words like it was obvious, which to someone like her, it probably was. Harry and Ron just looked confused. Even Ginny and Neville, who were listening in none too subtly, looked bewildered.

"Well, what does it mean?" Ron asked.

"It means that the Ministry is interfering at Hogwarts," Hermione said ominously.

Harry's eyebrows raised, and he looked questioningly at Regulus. "I'll explain later," he said. "For now, we need to get back up to the Tower. I have to meet with Snape first, so I'll meet you up there."

"Want me to go with you?" Harry asked.

"No, that's fine. I need to ask him something, and I doubt he will give me an honest answer if you're with me."

Harry nodded before standing to head out of the Great Hall. Ron and Hermione left to guide the first years to the dorms. Regulus stayed where he was, waiting until the Great Hall was slightly more empty before attempting to walk. The hard seats at the Gryffindor table had made his legs go numb and he already knew he would have trouble standing. He watched closely as Umbridge left the room, her eyes never once landing on him, which he was grateful for. He didn't think he would be able to deal with a confrontation with her tonight.

"Mr. Black, what are you waiting for?" a stern voice asked him. He looked up to see McGonagall frowning down at him.

"Sorry, Professor," he said. "I need to speak with Professor Snape."

"What about?" she asked, giving him a suspicious look that almost made him want to start laughing. He looked around quickly, but the table was nearly empty, and no one was close enough to hear him.

"He has been providing me with potions to help with my nerve damage. I need to take some before I can walk up to Gryffindor Tower," Regulus said. He tried to keep his voice matter-of-fact, but he couldn't help the slight blush that spread across his face. McGonagall softened.

"Of course," she said. She turned to walk away and he only barely noticed her pulling her wand out of her sleeve. She cast a silent spell at him that seemed to numb his back and legs. He breathed a sigh of relief, having forgotten what it felt like to not be in constant pain. He knew it wouldn't last, but it would at least help him walk to Snape's office.

The spell was odd because although it worked extremely well when cast by a skilled witch or wizard, long-term use could cause nerve damage of its own. It was heavily discouraged by the healer Regulus had seen at the end of last year before he regained the use of any of his limbs. He wasn't sure that he cared that it would cause more issues though, he wished he could cast the spell on himself every day. Unfortunately, whatever James had done with his magic had torn his magical core to shreds, and he could barely cast *wingardium leviosa* without getting winded.

He still had to walk slowly to Snape's office, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been. He knocked once on the door, waiting until he heard the faint, "Come in," before entering.

Snape looked up for a moment to see who it was before looking back at an old book that he had opened on the desk in front of him.

"We need to talk about Draco," Regulus said the moment the door was closed behind him. Snape's eyebrows twitched, but that was the only reaction that he gave, looking blandly at Regulus's face.

"I believed you were here for this month's dosage," Snape said mildly.

"I am," he said. Snape had been providing him with potions all summer to help with the pain and the damage that was done to his magical core. They were helping, but very, very slowly.

“Does Draco know about Sirius’s animagus form?”

Snape gave him a long silent look before answering. “I don’t see why he would,” he said finally.

“But the other Death Eaters know?” Regulus asked.

“Yes, Peter told them,” Snape answered, saying the words like they meant nothing. All the Death Eaters knew. The Dark Lord knew. Sirius wouldn’t be able to leave Grimmauld again, not with this threat, and he was already doing so poorly there. “Anything else?”

Regulus closed his eyes and sighed quietly. His head already hurt and the year hadn’t even started yet. “One other thing,” Regulus said. Snape tipped his head, the only indicator he gave for Regulus to go on. “The snake.”

Snape made a small sound, so quiet that Regulus almost missed it.

“What do you know about her?” Harry had been talking about her all summer, she played a prominent role in his nightmares after the confrontation in the graveyard.

“Not much,” Snape admitted. “I have yet to see her in person.” Regulus knew that Snape had returned to the Dark Lord’s side under Dumbledore’s instruction. He had no idea how he managed it without getting himself killed. Though he would never admit it out loud, he was a bit impressed. He didn’t think he could make himself face the Dark Lord again, let alone lie to him.

“Can you find out more?”

“For example?” Snape asked.

“Like what kind of snake she is? It might be a good idea to develop an anti-venom if she attacks someone.”

“Attacks someone?” Snape said, the first hint of a smile on his face. Regulus rolled his eyes.

“Not that it matters, but Harry is very worried about it. Can you just look it up, please?”

Snape shook his head slightly but ultimately agreed to look into it. Regulus breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t know why the snake put him on edge, but hearing Harry wake up screaming all summer hadn’t helped. Having anyone researching it made him feel better.

He walked back up to Gryffindor Tower after taking his potions. He moved slowly, enjoying the feeling of being back in Hogwarts, even if it was infested with Fudge’s poisonous toad. He felt safe here, and he felt grateful to be away from Grimmauld and all the drama held there. The corridors of Hogwarts seemed to welcome him home as he traveled through them like the castle itself was breathing a sigh of relief. Regulus breathed with it.

There were no memories of his and James’s final conversation about Lily and his patronus or the terrible loneliness that seemed to nest inside him at home. He had locked them away before leaving, but at Hogwarts, it was like they existed so far away from him that they could

never touch him again. He couldn't even feel the pain that existed there. More than that he didn't have to try and avoid Molly, Remus, or his belligerent brother while at Hogwarts. For now, that would be enough.

the textbooks.

Chapter Notes

surprise, surprise

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was a very long first day of classes. It seemed to be never-ending and by the time Regulus made it to Defense Against the Dark Arts, their final class of the day, he was about ready to shove his wand into his eye socket and kill himself.

When he had made it to the dorm the night prior, everyone had already been in bed and fast asleep, Ron snoring loudly, his legs hanging off the bed. It wasn't until the next morning that he discovered the feud that was brewing between Seamus and Harry.

"Seamus figures Harry is lying about You-Know-Who," Ron said succinctly.

"He's not the only one," Hermione muttered, though she didn't elaborate on who she meant. It wasn't a surprise that many thought Harry was lying, especially after the long summer of the *Prophet* trying to slander him, but it was bewildering to Regulus that one of Harry's dormmates would feel that way. Seamus had known Harry for years, and though they hadn't always been close, they were at least friends.

Tension just got worse as the day went on, and not just between Seamus. Ron and Hermione were at each other's throats right from the off.

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"We will have to talk to them," Hermione said with a stormy look on her face.

"Why?" Ron asked, shocked.

"Because we're prefects. It's up to us to put a stop to it," Hermione said.

They continued to bicker about it all the way to the Great Hall and throughout breakfast. Hermione kept lamenting about how they were getting the money to run their illegal

business, to which Harry was carefully avoiding eye contact. They hadn't talked about it with the others, how both of them had helped them, but Regulus hadn't realized it was actually a secret.

"Ask us no questions, and we'll tell you no lies," one of the twins said when asked about it.

They had a heavy schedule for the day: History of Magic, Potions, Divinations, and Defense Against the Dark Arts, all back to back. His body already ached just thinking about it. Lavender and Parvati pulled Regulus aside just as they were arriving at History of Magic after breakfast.

"Listen, we didn't want to ask this summer — while you were recovering and everything — but we need to know," Parvati said, looking supremely uncomfortable. She looked at Lavender helplessly.

"What do you need to know?" Regulus prompted. The girls seemed to have a silent conversation with just their eyes before Lavender sighed defeatedly.

"Is Harry telling the truth?" she asked. "About You-Know-Who."

Regulus felt an immediate surge of anger. How could they not just believe him? But he had to remember that they were just people, people who had been seeing a previously trusted source say for weeks that Harry was a liar. Plus, the idea that the Dark Lord had returned was a terrible, awful thing, probably the worst thing that any of them could imagine happening, so he couldn't blame anyone for wanting to believe it wasn't true. He took a deep breath.

"Yes, it's true," Regulus said. "He's not a liar."

Parvati looked shocked, her face draining of color. Lavender put an unconscious arm around her friend, squeezing her shoulder lightly.

"My mom wants to pull me out of school," Lavender said. "My dad doesn't believe it, says that there isn't anything happening beyond a teenage boy looking for attention, but if he finds out it's true..."

"You're not the only one," Parvati said. "Padma and I overheard our parents talking about what they would do if it ended up happening. They don't believe Harry, but my mom is big on backup plans. They want to move out of the country."

Regulus sighed. "I'm sorry," he said genuinely. "It's really scary, and I don't have much comfort to offer."

"What are you going to do? I mean, especially with your dad still out there," Parvati asked.

"My dad?" Regulus asked before remembering that the girls didn't actually know anything about Sirius. "Oh, right. Well —" The bell rang, indicating that class was starting. "I forgot that I haven't told you. Remind me tonight, we can talk about it."

Both of them looked extremely curious. He figured they were trustworthy enough to know that his *father* was innocent. He wouldn't tell them who he really was, no one needed to

know that, but he couldn't bear being friends with people who thought Sirius was a mass murderer. At the very least, his brother deserved someone to tell the truth about him.

Class was long and extremely boring, as always, and Binns ended it by assigning a foot-and-a-half-long essay on the giant wars. Regulus had nearly forgotten that it was their O.W.L.s year, the homework for classes was probably going to be ridiculously heavy.

Potions began with a long speech about what O.W.L. grade they had to get to continue on with the class in sixth year. Outstanding was apparently the only appropriate score. Regulus didn't care either way, he doubted he would even take another Potions N.E.W.T., he had done it in his first life and hated every minute of it. Of course, that was with Slughorn teaching the class, and Regulus found that man impossibly unbearable. Snape was much more tolerable even with his sour moods.

"Mr. Black, please stay after class," Snape said in a dull voice a few minutes before the end of class. He had been in a particularly bad mood, vanishing several students' potions because they weren't quite correct. Harry was beyond annoyed about it and was complaining to Hermione and Ron as they packed up.

"What is it?" Regulus asked once he and Snape were alone.

"I was asked to give you this," Snape said, sliding a book over his desk to Regulus. The title wasn't in English, it looked like it might be Greek.

"Okay?" Regulus said, waiting for Snape to explain. Snape flipped open the book to a marked page.

"This describes a collection of magical exercises that should help repair your magical core. They are not used very often in the modern day, most healers consider them too rough and barbaric." He sneered. "But as you do not have infinite time to wait for your core to heal naturally, this may be a good option."

"Who gave you this book?" Regulus asked suspiciously. Snape gave him a blank look. Regulus rolled his eyes. "I'm just curious."

"Dumbledore had it in his office," Snape said. "This book was removed from the Restricted Section a few decades ago. It is your decision if you should use it. I have another class to prepare for."

Snape all but shoved him out of the classroom, not that Regulus was keen on sticking around. He shoved the book into his bag, he would have to translate it later tonight. If Dumbledore wasn't willing to give it to him directly, it had to be at least vaguely illegal. Snape was right though, Regulus didn't have forever to recover naturally. He needed to find a way to fix his magical core as soon as possible if he was going to protect Harry.

Regulus arrived at the Gryffindor table just as Hermione was turning to snap at Ron. "I think Dumbledore's probably got plenty of evidence, even if he doesn't share it with you, Ron."

“Oh, shut up, the pair of you,” Harry said sharply. Regulus’s eyebrows raised in surprise as he took his seat. Ron and Hermione looked furious and offended. “Can’t you give it a rest? You’re always having a go at each other, it’s driving me mad.”

Harry didn't wait for a reply, shoving away from the table and stomping out of the Great Hall. He had left his food only partially eaten. Ron and Hermione started whispering to each other, but Regulus tuned them out. Harry’s irritability had been growing over the summer. At first, Regulus just thought it was the nightmares and the stress from what he had endured, but now he thought maybe something else was going on.

He tried to remember being this age the first time. Was he angry all the time? He definitely had sharper and more intense emotions as he went through puberty, but he didn’t remember anything like this. Even so, it wasn’t like any of the other boys in their year were acting this snappish. He was worried about him, and he wished he and Sirius were on speaking terms. If anyone could get through to Harry, it was Sirius.

Regulus was halfway through his shepherd’s pie for lunch when he noticed Draco standing up from the Slytherin table, walking like he was going to leave the Hall, except he kept stopping to look over his shoulder, making direct eye contact with Regulus. Regulus sighed, he would have to tell him to be more subtle about wanting to meet, this was just painfully obvious.

“I’ll see you guys in class,” he said, standing to follow Draco who had finally left when he noticed Regulus moving.

“Sure,” Ron said, his mouth so full of food that it just sounded like the letter R.

Regulus headed outside to the Viaduct Courtyard. Draco was easy to spot, standing half-hidden behind a pillar. “What’s going on?” he asked once they were in front of each other.

“Listen, I’m not warning you because —”

“Draco,” Regulus said sharply, Draco’s mouth snapped closed. “I don’t care, just skip to the warning. I don’t have time to listen to your reasons.”

Draco looked distinctly unhappy, and Regulus wondered for a moment if he would abandon the conversation altogether, but he seemed to fortify himself and continued speaking.

“Umbridge, the new Defense professor, works for Minister Fudge.”

“Yes,” Regulus said, nodding for him to go on.

“You have to be careful,” Draco said, then lowered his voice even further. “My father said that she’s here to try and have you arrested, and based on the class I just had with her, she’s very good at provoking people.” He had a blotchy redness stretching across his face and neck like he was embarrassed to be doing something that was even mildly friendly.

“I’m not easily provoked,” Regulus said, he wondered if that was really true anymore.

“Yes, but —” his hands flailed out helplessly.

“But?” Regulus prompted. Draco gaped at him like a fish, as if he couldn’t quite decide what words to use.

“Other Gryffindors are,” Draco finally settled on.

“Ah,” Regulus said with a knowing nod.

Of course, this was about Harry. Draco and his silly, misguided feelings about the boy were almost too embarrassing to witness. Draco was lucky that no one else seemed to pay close enough attention. He was especially lucky that Harry was too busy being frustrated by him to evaluate why Draco might act that way.

“I’ll be careful,” Regulus said placatingly. “Do you know anything else about her?”

“Not yet,” Draco said.

“Let me know if you find out anything,” Regulus said, and in a rare moment of gentleness, reached up to grab his arm in comfort. “We’re family, and we have to stick together. That’s the only way we’re going to make it out of this.”

It was a bit manipulative, but there was no doubt in Regulus’s head that Narcissa and probably Lucius had instilled feelings of pride and protection when it came to “family.” It was certainly something done in the Black family, and Narcissa didn’t have nearly as bad a childhood as Sirius and Regulus did, she would probably push for Draco to feel the same way. Draco nodded seriously.

Regulus felt a pang in his chest, remembering how little Draco had been just a few short years ago, how he, like so many other kids at Hogwarts, took on responsibilities they couldn’t possibly carry. He was older now, taller certainly, but he still looked so young. He wanted to ask about the Dark Lord, if Draco had been forced to meet him or talk to him. He couldn’t imagine how terrifying that would be. But he couldn’t do that now, he would have to ease Draco into that conversation. For now, warnings about Umbridge would have to cut it.

He made it up to the Divinations classroom just a bit later, though his legs were aching badly now, and the climb up the tower was like torture. He had to stop more than once to lean against the wall, breathing heavily. Ron ran into him on his way.

“All right?” Ron asked cheerfully, though there was a pinch of worry between his eyebrows.

“Fine, just a bit sore,” Regulus replied. Ron, without asking, grabbed Regulus’s bag off his shoulder and carried it for him. The lack of weight made things slightly easier, though the ladder climb was still a bit tetchy. Ron was waiting for him at the top and walked into the classroom next to him.

Harry was sitting alone at their usual table. Lavender and Parvati were right behind him, sitting at their own table, their heads bent over their Divinations textbook. Both of them smiled at him and Ron as they ambled over.

“Hermione and me have stopped arguing,” Ron said as he plopped down next to Harry who looked up with a slight glare.

“Good,” Harry huffed.

“But Hermione says she thinks it would be nice if you stopped taking your temper out on us.”

“I’m not —”

“I’m just the messenger,” Ron said, throwing his hands up in surrender. They were interrupted from continuing their conversation by Trelawney starting class. Regulus wondered if Hermione was right, if Harry was just taking out his frustrations on them. She probably was, though again all Regulus could feel was concern. He felt like an old parent who no longer understood the life and personality of his teenage son.

Divination was much the same as past years, they were studying dreams now and their only assignment was to start keeping a dream journal. Regulus didn’t dream very often anymore, so he would probably have to make things up as he had done before. Even Ron seemed frustrated by the prospect, though like there always was with Divinations, there was a slight gleam in his eyes.

Defense was next, but Regulus wasn’t able to head right there. “I need to go see Pomfrey first,” he said.

“Want us to come with you?” Harry asked.

“Better not,” Regulus said. “I don’t want to risk you both being late, especially with Umbridge.”

They both nodded, heading off to class, as Regulus slowly walked to the Hospital Wing. He needed to start brewing his own pain draughts given how many he needed a week, but he hadn’t had the time yet since they just arrived at school, and Pomfrey was unwilling to give him more than a few each time he visited.

Regulus wasn’t really that late to Defense, less than five minutes, but the way Umbridge froze when he opened the door, and then slowly smiled that sickly sweet grin made dread pool in his stomach.

“Sorry Professor,” Regulus said immediately. “I had to stop by —”

“I do not require any of your excuses, Mr. Black,” she said. “Please take your seat. We will discuss this after class.”

Regulus just barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes, but took his seat next to Harry who gave him an uncomfortable smile. Harry pushed a copy of the textbook toward him. *Defensive Magical Theory* was the title.

“We’re reading chapter one,” Harry said softly. Regulus opened his book but didn’t start reading right away, instead, he noticed that Hermione, who was sitting across from them, still

had her book closed and was staring at Umbridge. It didn't take long before Umbridge took notice and from there, a fight broke out.

Hermione was arguing with Umbridge about the importance of using practical magic in classes, and how they needed it for their O.W.L.s. Ron joined in, as did Harry. Even Dean Thomas started arguing with the woman. Harry though was growing increasingly irritated, so much so that Regulus could feel the spark of angry magic in the air near him. Regulus realized this was exactly what Draco was talking about, they were all being provoked.

Regulus thought of Sirius and the way he would act out when they were young, often taking credit for things Regulus had done so that Regulus wouldn't be punished. He never really understood why, it always felt short-sighted to him at the time, but he got it now. He wasn't going to let Harry get in trouble if he could help it.

Regulus had been struggling with his magic, but he had just taken a pain potion, and he felt up to it, he hoped he was up to it really. He was certainly angry enough and could channel that into spellcasting. Regardless, he had to do something to draw attention, otherwise, Harry was going to dig himself into a hole and immediately draw Umbridge's ire.

"Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourself?" Umbridge said.

"Hmm, let's think..." Harry started to say.

"*Incendio !*" Regulus shouted, standing up out of his seat to do so. He had intended to light his textbook on fire, but his magic was off and his anger and desperation were heavy in his lungs. Every textbook in the classroom went up in flames, shouts of shock filling the classroom as students pushed away from their desks. Regulus nearly doubled over with pain, using a hand to steady himself on the desk. He gritted his teeth. "These books are rubbish and so is your *teaching plan*," he snarled, the words coming out way harsher than he intended given the way pain was rolling through him.

Umbridge gasped loudly, a spark of fear in her eyes for just a second before it was drowned out by glee.

"Come here, Mr. Black, dear." She reminded him of Walburga, of how she was the year before Sirius was disowned, the way she cracked. Regulus walked painfully up to her desk where she pulled out a small roll of pink parchment out of her handbag, scribbled something on it, and rolled it up. "Take this to Professor McGonagall."

Regulus didn't bother to grab his bag, he wasn't sure he would be able to walk all the way out of the classroom, let alone while holding all his books. Harry and the others would grab it for him. Everyone in the class looked shell-shocked and confused, he gave Harry a hard look that he hoped conveyed the meaning "do not do anything else to draw her attention."

"And fifty points from Gryffindor," she called sternly right as the door was closing behind him.

It took him a while to make it to McGonagall's office, but eventually, he made it to her door, knocking and waiting for her to call out before entering. She unrolled the piece of parchment

right when Regulus handed it to her. He sat heavily in his chair, breathing out a heavy sigh of relief.

“Is it true?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered, though he didn’t actually know what Umbridge had written.

“You lit all the textbooks on fire?” she asked incredulously. Regulus sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“Yes.”

She frowned at him for a moment. “Have a biscuit, Black,” she said. He gave her a sideways smile and took one from the tin of cookies on her desk.

“You need to be careful. Misbehavior in her class could cost you more than detention,” she said.

“I know,” Regulus said. “I know that, but it was either me or Harry. I had to draw her attention somehow.”

She pursed her lips. “I understand,” she said before sighing quietly. “You will have detention with her every evening this week starting tomorrow.” He nodded, he figured that was coming. “How are you otherwise?”

“Better all the time,” he said with an unhappy smile, already getting up to leave. She didn’t stop him, and he headed right for the dorms. The rest of them would find him there eventually. Of course, he hadn’t expected Harry to be quite so angry when he did.

“What the hell was that?” Harry shouted, bursting into the dorm alone. He wondered if the other boys were avoiding the dorm, perhaps waiting in the common room for Harry’s anger to burn out.

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you do that? Why did you burn up her books?” Harry looked so angry that his eyes were practically glowing.

“Because, Harry,” Regulus snapped back. The long day filled with pain and stress finally boiled over. “Umbridge is out to get you. *You*, specifically. She wants you to fight her. It doesn’t matter if Hermione or Ron argue with her, she doesn’t care about them, but she is here to mess with you. I knew if I didn’t intervene, that you would say something stupid.” It came out a bit meaner than he wanted it to, and he immediately regretted it.

Harry’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I’m not an idiot,” he said, his voice low like a growl.

Regulus sighed. “No, I know that —”

“Do you?” Harry snarled. “Because you don’t act like you do.” Regulus paused for a second.

“What are you talking about?”

“Everyone treats me like I never pay attention,” Harry said. “But I do! I notice things.” The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, warning signs blaring in his head, as he took in the way Harry’s hands were clenched into fists at his sides.

“I don’t —” Harry threw his hands up.

“I know you knew my father,” Harry hissed. Regulus froze.

“What?”

“I know you knew him. You said you didn’t, but I know you were lying.”

“Harry, I have no idea —”

“You always call me James, when you’ve been knocked out or you’re just waking up. You always think I’m James ‘cause I look like him,” Harry said.

“Well, yes, we went to school at the same time,” Regulus replied.

“Stop lying! I know you’re lying! You went to school with Remus but you still call him Lupin. There is no reason for you to call my father James!”

Regulus’s mouth hung open in shock.

“Sirius has no idea though, does he? Does anyone know?” Harry looked halfway to feral, anger rolling off him in violent waves. Regulus felt like everything in his life was cracking at the seams, and now Harry knew. Harry *knew*. Regulus thought he was being so careful. How? How could he know?

“Harry, I —”

“Don’t bother,” Harry snapped suddenly, taking a large step backward. “I don’t want to hear anything from you unless it’s the truth.” With those words, he was gone, stomping back out of the dorm and down to the common room.

It had been a long day, far too long. Regulus collapsed onto his bed. Harry knew about James. And worse than that, he knew Regulus was a liar.

Chapter End Notes

a while back i got a few comments about how harry is "so unobservant" and never notices regulus calling him james, and they made me cackle cause i knew this fight was coming.

the quill.

Chapter Notes

chapter 69 ;)

Regulus still needed to tell Lavender and Parvati about his “father,” but he didn’t think he had the energy to do it that night, not after the confrontation with Harry. He didn’t even bother to go to dinner. He was over it, over the entire day. He collapsed into bed and read one of the books Hermione had purchased for him over the summer until he was tired enough to go to sleep. It didn’t take long, all the walking and stress of the day settling into his bones and dragging him unconscious before he could protest.

He woke the next morning just before sunrise. He could hear the rain pelting against the window as he drifted up out of sleep. It wasn’t surprising weather for the time of year, but he did wonder when they would see the sun again. He wished he could lay out in direct sunlight like he had several times over the summer when things got too overwhelming, climbing up to the roof of Grimmauld for a bit of silence and relaxation, stretching out in the sunshine like a sleepy house cat.

He got out of bed and left for breakfast before any of his dormmates were up. The Great Hall was nearly empty, with only a few tired-looking seventh years here and there, and a few professors. Dumbledore wasn’t there which surprised him, but the headmaster had seemed oddly absent so far this year. He would need to find time to talk to the man in private.

Over the summer, he had seen Dumbledore only twice. He came for Order meetings, but would often leave right when they ended, avoiding everyone in the house who wasn’t old enough to join. It was driving Harry crazy for some reason.

The first time he saw Dumbledore was during the first day of summer break when he came to test the wards of Grimmauld and cast another layer of his own protective wards, including a Fidelius Charm.

“Who do you want as Secret Keeper?” Dumbledore asked Sirius and Regulus. Regulus was surprised at first when Sirius suggested offering Grimmauld as a headquarters for the Order. They were still on speaking terms at the time, so he asked Regulus first what he thought. At first, Regulus wanted to refuse, hating the idea of so many people coming in and out of his house, but he realized it would allow him to stay close to the action. He could barely walk during those days, and he needed to be close by.

“You should do it,” Regulus said to Sirius. Sirius’s eyebrows shot up, and he jolted slightly in his chair.

“I agree,” Lupin said. He was leaning against the wall, almost like he was trying to separate himself from what he felt was a family decision, even though they had specifically invited him in. “You’re the best person for it.”

Sirius’s cheeks colored, and his eyes looked suspiciously bright like he might start crying.

“Okay,” Sirius said.

“Very well,” Dumbledore said evenly.

He left before Regulus could stop him, right after he finished casting the spell. They spent a few weeks talking about Lupin’s fruitless trip to Albania, though the conversations puttered out once Tonks started spending a little too much time at Grimmauld Place. Regulus didn’t dislike her, he thought she was fine, though he didn’t love having to interact with an Auror every time he ventured outside his bedroom, Order member or not. However, he wished Lupin wouldn’t be so blatant about speaking to her, honestly, didn’t she have her own house?

Regardless, the conversations about Horcruxes were frustrating, to say the least. They had started researching Helga Hufflepuff’s cup, but beyond the fact that the Dark Lord had direct access to it at one point, there wasn’t anything helpful. They had no idea where he might have hidden it.

Of course, there was the possibility that it, or another Horcrux, was in Bellatrix’s vault at Gringotts, but unless they wanted to risk life and limb just to break in, it was inaccessible to them for the time being. Not to mention that beyond the diadem and the cup, they didn’t know what the Horcruxes could be.

It felt hopeless at times, and all Regulus wanted to do was go over everything with Dumbledore. He was sure the man knew more than he was letting on. He didn’t see him again until after Harry’s trial, but that was also brief, and he didn’t stay to chat with any of them. Apparently, Dumbledore had provided him the book with possibly illegal rituals to help repair his magical core, but even that he had done through a third party.

He ate breakfast slowly, watching students sleepily drag themselves into the Great Hall, before heading out to the library to work on homework for an hour or two before classes. He wasn’t avoiding anyone exactly, he just wasn’t ready to face any of them. Especially Harry. He sighed as he pulled out his potions book to start working on his essay.

“Good morning, Mr. Black,” Madam Pince said. She was ambling through the aisles, double-checking that all the books from yesterday had been properly put away. She had warmed up to him a bit over the years, as much as someone like her could warm up to anyone. Although she was far nicer to him when he was alone, she didn’t seem to trust any of the other students. Even Hermione, the bookworm that she was. Regulus thought it was because Hermione spent too much time pestering the woman with all her checked-out books.

“Morning,” Regulus said quietly. He turned back to his book before something occurred to him. “Excuse me, Madam Pince.” She paused and inclined her head. “I was wondering if there was a way to request more books on a certain topic.”

“Do you mean newly published books?” Madam Pince asked.

“Sure, or maybe older books that might not be here,” Regulus replied.

“I place orders for many new books four times a year. Is there something specifically that you are looking for?” she asked, giving him a vaguely suspicious look.

“I was hoping to read more about the founders of Hogwarts. Specifically some of the famous objects that were tied to them like the Sword of Gryffindor or the Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw. I believe I’ve read every book even tangentially related to them that’s in the library already.”

“I see,” she said thoughtfully. “There are not many new books about the topic. It is not a popular subject for newly published materials. I can check and see if there is anything I have missed if you would like?”

She said the words sternly, almost like they were a punishment, but Regulus wasn’t about to turn down the help. “That would be great, thank you. I appreciate it.”

She nodded again and turned to leave before stopping. “You may ask one of your Ravenclaw friends to check their common room if you want information on the diadem.”

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked.

“They have a rather expansive and unique library of their own up there,” she said. Regulus hadn’t known that, but in retrospect it made sense. He would have to talk to Luna, if anyone could get him in, it was her.

Charms was his first class of the day, he arrived before most of the other students, but when they all joined him, he noticed Harry followed Ron to sit next to him. Hermione threw Regulus a pitying look and sat in the empty seat where Harry usually sat.

“I guess Harry talked to you,” Regulus muttered quietly once she was sitting.

“He just said he was upset with you,” Hermione replied, “not what it was about.”

Regulus breathed a silent sigh of relief.

“I wouldn’t worry too much. He’s so angry all the time, I don’t think it’s your fault,” Hermione said.

“This time it is,” Regulus said quietly. “Though he is angry all the time now. I’m not sure how to help him,” he confessed.

“Maybe he needs to talk to someone,” Hermione said, lowering her whispered voice even further so that it was almost inaudible.

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked.

“You know, like a therapist. Wizards have therapists, right?” she asked curiously.

Regulus stared at her for a long moment. "I don't know," he said honestly. "What's a therapist?" She huffed a laugh, but they were interrupted by Flitwick before she could respond.

Flitwick spent the first half of the class giving them a long speech about the importance of their O.W.L.s and how it could influence their futures. There was a lot of talk about future careers. Regulus forgot he would have to go through all of the career advising all over again. Last time Slughorn had correctly guessed that Regulus wouldn't work, but would instead take over as Head of the Family.

He would have to meet with McGonagall this time around, and he had no idea what to tell her. He didn't think she would appreciate the same answer that he gave to Slughorn. He especially didn't think she would appreciate his real answer considering he was pretty sure he would die a second time fighting the Dark Lord and wouldn't ever have to worry about a future career. He would have to come up with something.

They were faced with the same speech from McGonagall in Transfiguration, though her's was somehow even more intense. He skipped Care of Magical Creatures altogether. Hagrid still wasn't back, and he didn't care if the new Professor gave him detention for missing class. He was also a little worried about trying to walk all the way to the edge of the Forbidden Forest and back. Herbology was last, and it was also filled with the same speech as the others. The year had just begun, and he was already exhausted by the amount of work he had in front of him.

He ate dinner immediately after class since he didn't know when he would have time again, he didn't exactly know what to expect from Umbridge's detention. It could drag on till midnight for all he knew.

He arrived at her office door five minutes before the hour, knocking quietly before entering without waiting for a reply. The room was egregious and frankly assaulting to the eye. Every single surface was covered in bright pink decor, there were tons of lacy covers and vases with dried flowers. More than that, there were a large amount of decorative plates with multicolored kittens decorating the front of them.

"Good evening, Mr. Black," Umbridge said in her sickly sweet tone, a wide, unnerving grin spread across her toad-like face. "Right on time. I see you are already benefiting from my influence and learning to control yourself."

Regulus did not reply. The way she spoke, her very aura, made his teeth hurt. He was pretty sure that if he opened his mouth, he would start flinging spells at her just to work off some of his anger.

"Let's get started, shall we?" she asked. Regulus continued to stare at her, taking a seat at the table across from her desk as she spoke. "You are in an... advantageous position, Mr. Black." He gave her a questioning look. He didn't think being a suspected murderer was very advantageous. "Though your father's place in wizarding society is unpleasant." *That's one way of putting it*, he thought. "As a son of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, you will still be highly sought after once you leave Hogwarts."

Regulus thought he may have thrown up a bit in his mouth when she mentioned *the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black* , but he tried to hold it together. He didn't understand how she could decide to play both sides of him. On one hand, she seemed very certain that he was a killer who should be thrown in Azkaban. On the other hand, she clearly held pureblood values and thought he had potential.

She just wanted him on her side, he realized, regardless of if he was truly a murderer. Fudge must have been the one that was afraid of him, he was certainly afraid of Sirius, so it made sense. Umbridge probably hated him because he was protecting Harry, whom Fudge hated.

“Don’t you agree?” she prompted.

“That I’ll be highly sought after?” Regulus asked.

“That you are in an advantageous position,” she said. Regulus imagined tearing her spine out with his teeth.

“I am,” he said. He didn’t mean it the way she meant it, but it didn’t matter. He wasn’t in an advantageous position for his future, but he had her attention, which meant it wasn’t on Harry.

“Excellent,” she said with an evil grin. “I’m glad we see eye to eye. You only need to make *better* choices, Mr. Black.” She was trying to infuse the statement with some hidden meaning, but Regulus wasn’t going to bother looking for it.

“Okay,” he said. He was ready to get this detention over with.

“Now, you are going to be doing some lines for me, Mr. Black.” He wished she would stop saying his name. He reached for his bag to grab a quill. “No, not with your quill. You’re going to be using a rather special one of mine. Here you go.”

Regulus felt an odd swamping of anxiety settle over him as she handed him a long, thin black quill. It had an unusually sharp point to it. Something was definitely wrong with it.

“I want you to write *‘I will make the right choices,’*” she said. Regulus pulled a piece of parchment closer to him.

“How many times?” he asked.

Her face twitched. “As long as it takes for the message to sink in,” she said. “Off you go.”

Regulus only barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes. He placed the tip of the quill against the parchment and started writing: *I will make the right choices* .

He gasped in pain right away, dropping the quill as it clattered on the desk. It took a second for the words to start appearing, the sharp pain coming first, but he noticed that the words on the parchment had shown up in shiny red ink. A second later, the words began carving themselves into the skin on the back of his hand. He watched in horror as he was wounded by the quill.

He looked up to find Umbridge already watching him with a wide grin. “Yes?” she asked.

He didn’t reply, because the only thought he had in his head was *you’re not going to get away with this* . She wanted to do this to Harry. *To Harry* . If Regulus hadn’t intervened, Harry would be sitting right here carving words into his hand, permanently scarred by this woman. She probably wanted to, he guessed. She wanted to hurt Harry like she was hurting Regulus, and Regulus was going to kill her.

By the time he left Umbridge’s office, the castle was deserted, and it was well after midnight, just as he’d predicted. The quill had caused so much pain that it had exasperated his nerve damage. He was only halfway through detention when he started feeling sick with pain. He refused to show weakness in front of that woman though.

He left the classroom barely able to walk and only made it to a nearby corridor before he collapsed onto his hands and knees, immediately throwing up his dinner right onto the floor. He had to work not to collapse directly into it, that would have just been the cherry on top of his terrible night. He went to lie down next to it when he heard a voice.

“ *Evanesco* . What are you doing? You can’t sleep here,” the voice hissed. He looked up to see Draco looming over him, his eyes bright in the dimly lit corridor.

“I wasn’t planning to sleep here,” Regulus said unhappily.

“I told you not to engage with her! I warned you not to,” Draco whispered furiously. “What did she do to you?”

Regulus held out his hand, Draco gasped and covered his mouth like he might also be sick.

“She carved words into your hand?” he breathed.

“She used a blood quill,” Regulus said. “Had me do it to myself.”

Draco looked torn for a moment, before spinning around and sprinting down the hallway, tossing a, “Stay here,” over his shoulder. Regulus sat up slowly, leaning against the chilly stone wall of the corridor. He wondered where Draco had run off to. He hoped he wasn’t getting a professor, Regulus really did not want to talk to another adult about this right now.

He didn’t have to wait long before Draco was back. He was carrying something in his hands, and it took Regulus a moment to realize it was dittany and bandages.

“Oh,” Regulus said, surprised by the unusual show of care.

“I had some extra in my trunk,” Draco explained. “Why did you get detention with her? Were you trying to find out more information about her? Did she tell you anything?” He spoke quickly as he began applying the dittany to Regulus’s hand. His fingers were surprisingly gentle despite his clearly agitated state.

“Harry was about to say something to her that he shouldn’t, I was just drawing attention away,” Regulus explained. Draco froze for a second.

“Would she have done this to Harry?” he asked quietly.

“Almost certainly,” Regulus said, mostly because it was true. But also because he had heard how Draco was bragging about the Ministry removing bad teachers at Hogwarts. Whatever he felt inside, publicly he was supporting Umbridge, and he needed to know that Harry would pay for it. Draco’s face grew sharp, and Regulus blinked quickly. He felt like he was hallucinating for a moment because a second later it was back to normal. Regulus shook his head to clear it.

“What are you going to do?” Draco asked quietly as he wrapped up Regulus’s hand in a bandage.

“Nothing you need to worry about,” Regulus said with a sigh. He and Draco parted ways without speaking much else, but Regulus felt oddly touched by Draco checking on him. He especially appreciated the dittany. The quill might still scar, but at least it wouldn’t be stinging continuously for the rest of the week.

He was especially excited to go to sleep when he made it back to the dorm, but his plans were interrupted when he entered the common room to find Harry sitting in front of the fire. He jumped up the moment he saw Regulus.

“You’re back late,” Harry said, his voice a mix of worry and anger.

“Umbridge just let me out,” Regulus explained.

“I saw you in the hallway with Draco,” Harry said accusingly. “What were you two talking about?”

Regulus sighed tiredly and sat on the couch near where Harry was sitting a moment prior. He didn’t want to talk to Harry about his conversation with Cousin Draco.

“I’m ready to tell you about James,” he said quietly. Harry’s mouth snapped closed, Regulus hadn’t even realized that it was still open. He stared at Regulus for a long, silent moment, tension set across his shoulders, before he dropped back into his chair.

“Okay,” Harry said.

Regulus looked at his wrapped-up hand — thankfully Harry either hadn’t noticed or hadn’t asked about it yet — thinking of the words beneath them. *I will make the right choices*. What was the right choice here? He hadn’t told Harry about James before because he was afraid and still heartbroken. Fundamentally, nothing had changed since then. He was still running. He couldn’t keep lying to Harry, not to protect his own feelings.

“The summer before my fifth year, Sirius ran away from home,” Regulus said. Harry leaned back in his chair, looking very much like a young kid waiting for a good bedtime story. Regulus smiled slightly despite himself before remembering where this story began. “My parents discovered something about him, and it was the last straw in their already fraying relationship. They nearly killed him.”

He took a deep breath. He had never told anyone this, not the entire thing. Only James knew what he did, and he had sworn him to secrecy.

“What did they discover?” Harry asked.

“That’s something for him to share, I think,” Regulus said. “It doesn’t matter anyway. They would have found a reason to disown him regardless. They were looking for an excuse. The night he left, I found him nearly dead in my father’s study. I panicked and helped him escape to the Potter’s house. That was the first time I spoke to your father.”

“Does Sirius know you saved him?” Harry asked softly.

“No,” Regulus said. “I would have gotten into trouble had my parents found out at the time, and he and I weren’t speaking, so it hardly mattered.”

“Like you’re not speaking now?”

Regulus gave a quiet laugh. “Sort of,” Regulus said. “Yes, sort of. Anyway, when I went back to school, your father was very intent on providing updates on how Sirius was doing now that he wasn’t part of the Black family.”

“Why?”

“Because he thought he could bring us back together I think. At first, he was just mad ‘cause Sirius and I were still fighting every now and then, but then he started his campaign to prove that I loved my own brother.” He smiled at the memory. James always wanted to save him in the beginning, before he realized that Regulus wasn’t worth saving.

Harry was quiet for a moment while Regulus was lost in thought. “Is that it?”

Regulus blushed slightly. “No, he and I — well, we —” This was much harder to say out loud than he expected it to be.

“You what?” Harry prompted, a deeply curious look on his face.

“We were... together, for a time,” Regulus settled on. Harry’s mouth opened in shock, his eyes widening behind his slightly smudged glasses.

“My dad was gay?” he asked.

“No, not gay,” Regulus said, laughing helplessly. “He definitely liked women too. I mean, he ended up with your mother.”

“Oh, right?” Harry said, rubbing his neck in embarrassment. “How long were you two...?”

“About a year,” Regulus said. It felt like so little time when he said it like that, but it had changed the trajectory of his entire life. Even now it seemed to control him.

“What happened?”

“I took the Mark,” Regulus said bluntly. “It was going to end one way or another, but that was the final catalyst. He started dating Lily later that year, and they were married right out of Hogwarts.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Harry asked softly, his voice layered with hurt. Regulus’s chest clenched painfully.

“It didn’t work out between us, and though your father moved on fairly easily,” Regulus said, pausing so he could swallow the lump in his throat, “it was very painful for me, Harry.”

“Is that why you’re here? Because you knew my father?”

Regulus thought about it before answering. “Yes, in part. I knew you would be in danger, and I couldn’t let James’s son go unprotected. It’s different now. I’m not just here for James.”

Harry nodded like he understood that Regulus couldn’t have forced any more explanations about his feelings out of his mouth.

“Did you love him?”

Regulus nearly choked on his tongue. “Yes,” he said, the word costing him a great deal. Harry gave him a keen look.

“I’m sorry,” Harry replied. “And I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

Regulus laughed, grateful for the way the tension broke. “It’s okay. I’m sorry I lied to you about it,” he said.

“And Sirius never knew?” Harry asked, sounding bewildered.

“Pretty sure I would be killed a second time if he found out,” Regulus said. He meant the words as a joke, but Harry looked startled like he might be in real danger. “No, he never knew. It didn’t matter anyway. James and Lily were meant to be together. I wouldn’t have gotten in the way of that.”

He was surprised by how true the words were, even with the way the thought of James wrecked him from the inside out. No James and Lily meant no Harry, and a world without Harry wasn’t one Regulus cared to live in. He loved him like he was his own son; like he had raised him rather than the Dursleys doing it.

Harry nodded, though he was still giving Regulus a strange look. Harry turned to stare into the fire for a long few minutes, and Regulus slowly started to nod off. He was surprised by the way the truth had lifted off his chest like a heavy weight being removed. He felt lighter now like his lungs weren’t so constricted by the memory of James. The pain was still there, as he suspected it always would be, but the guilt was gone.

the metamorphosis.

“If you don’t stop what you’re doing, I’m going to —”

“Put us in detention?” Fred said with that horrible mocking tone that he and his brother had perfected.

“Make us write lines?” George cut in, a cocky smirk on his face.

The others in the common room were laughing now, watching the interaction like it was a weekly special on TV. Ron was looking down at his lap, clearly pretending nothing was happening around him. No one was going to stand up with her, no one else would say anything. Hermione drew herself up to her full height — still considerably shorter than Fred and George — and narrowed her eyes menacingly.

“No,” she said, her voice shaking with anger. She always hated the way anger affected her, making her sound like she was about to start crying. She knew it ruined any effect her anger might have. “But I will write to your mother.”

The effect of her words was immediate. George’s mouth gaped open for a second before he took a step back from her.

“You wouldn’t,” he breathed, sounding horrified.

“Oh, yes, I would,” she replied seriously. “I can’t stop you from eating the stupid things yourself, but you’re not giving them to first years.”

She stalked back to the chair by the fire that she had been sitting in a moment ago, her hair crackling with electricity. Ron had sunk so low in his seat that his nose was almost touching his knees. She stood over him, putting her hands on her hips.

“Thanks for your support, Ron,” she snapped.

“You handled it fine by yourself,” he muttered back, refusing to make eye contact with her.

It was just another moment of her friends not backing her up. Ron would just bicker with her. God, he was so frustrating. Harry always refused to get involved, he would sink into himself the moment they started fighting, looking off to the side and pretending like he wasn’t there. It used to make her feel bad for him, but now it was just annoying. Especially given the way Harry had begun snapping at them, trying to bite their heads off every time either of them opened their mouths.

Regulus would sometimes try to help, but he had so many things going on that he was rarely with them except in classes nowadays. Not to mention that he was friends with Lavender and Parvati, both of which drove Hermione up the wall. She would never understand why Regulus was friends with them.

She always thought that Regulus was an ally, but she had to remember who he really was. A pureblood, just like Lavender and Parvati, just like Ron. They couldn't really understand, they never did. Harry was a half-blood, but at least he was raised by muggles. He knew what it was like to come into the wizarding world with no knowledge.

However, she couldn't really be compared to him. He had ties to the wizarding world that she never would. He had a pureblood father with a long line of pureblooded family members. His mother was a witch, and even though she was muggleborn, she was still a part of the world before Harry entered it.

Hermione had no ties. If she disappeared from the wizarding world, there would be no trace of her. She never mentioned it to anyone but she was always felt unimportant to the wizard community. That's why it was so important that her friends supported her when she stood up for things. Like when Fred and George were breaking the rules.

The school year had barely started, and it was already turning out to be a terrible one. Umbridge's presence could be felt all over the school even though she hadn't done anything too horrible yet. Other than, of course, her lack of desire to teach the students anything practical. The fact that they would be unprepared for their O.W.L. at the end of the year was weighing heavily on Hermione.

She was hoping to spend the weekend after their first week with her friends getting ahead on the mountain of homework they were assigned, but of course, neither Harry nor Ron wanted to. Both of them were too focused on Quidditch practice. Regulus said he would, but then was nowhere to be found all weekend. Hermione spent most of the weekend alone in the library.

Ron received a letter on Sunday from his brother Percy telling him to stay away from both Harry and Regulus, which caused Harry to be in a terrible mood for the rest of the day. Hermione suspected it was because of Regulus's mention more than his own. There were also vague mentions about Sirius possibly hiding in London in the *Daily Prophet* that morning, and Regulus disappeared from the Great Hall so quickly that he looked like he was running from a fire.

"I wish Regulus and Sirius would just talk to each other," Harry complained that night. Regulus was missing again, but if Harry wasn't worried about where he was, then Hermione wasn't going to dwell on it.

"Why won't they talk to each other?" Ron asked distractedly.

He was looking through his dream journal for Divinations again. Hermione rolled her eyes. From the first moment that Ron happened to correctly *guess* one answer in that class, Trelawney, Lavender, Parvati, and Luna had fawned over Ron for his "divination skills." Hermione knew it wasn't real. Divination was a very inexact science, and Ron was just making things up to garner attention.

She thought that it must be some kind of pureblood thing to be obsessed with divination. Even in the muggle world, most people knew that fortune tellers were just skilled liars

playing on peoples' emotions. She understood the search for the unknown, but it was obvious that using divinations to do it was just not reliable. At least arithmancy provided some structure, divination was just guessing.

"Because Regulus took me to Godric's Hollow to see my parents' graves. Sirius blames him for almost getting me expelled."

"Well, I mean, it *is* his fault though, isn't it?" Hermione asked, she tried to make her voice gentle. Harry had been acting unreasonably when he demanded to go see the graves, it was Regulus's fault for indulging him.

"He was just trying to help me," Harry responded, a dark coolness to his voice. Hermione sighed quietly. She knew he wouldn't see reason no matter how many times she tried to explain it.

"But you weren't expelled," Ron said, his eyebrows furrowing, "so why is he still so upset?"

"I don't know," Harry said, flopping back in his chair like a child throwing a fit. "But I'm sick of being the go-between. This morning Regulus gave me an entire list of things I needed to relay to Sirius. Most of them were just different ways of phrasing *don't leave the bloody house*."

"I'm sure Sirius took that well," Ron said sarcastically, turning back to his book. Harry rolled his eyes, though it wasn't aimed at Ron.

"Of course not," Harry replied. "I swear he's going insane alone in that house."

"Alone? Isn't Professor Lupin there?" Hermione asked.

"He's not your professor anymore," Ron said distractedly.

"No, he's off on Order business. At least, that's what I think. Sirius wouldn't say," Harry said with a deep frown.

She often wondered about the adults out there on missions for the Order. Honestly, she was especially worried about Prof— Remus. Based on everything she read about werewolves, he already seemed to be living a very dangerous life. Who knew what he was coming into contact with while out in the world? The wizarding world seemed to chew up so many people, anyone that didn't fit the perfect mold.

The next morning dawned with even worse news. The ministry had appointed Umbridge as Hogwarts's first-ever High Inquisitor, claiming that it was all for educational reform. At lunch, Fred and George mentioned her coming by to inspect their Charms class, and later that evening Ron mentioned the way Umbridge came into Divinations and demanded a prediction from Trelawney.

"I hope her prediction was true," Harry muttered unhappily.

“What did she predict?” Hermione asked, not even bothering to keep the venom out of her voice. They all knew Trelawney was a talentless hack.

“She said that Umbridge was in danger and to watch out for large creatures,” Ron said, his eyes suddenly lighting up. “I think it probably is true. I told you about my dreams, didn’t I?”

“What is it with your dreams?” Hermione said acidly.

Ron looked momentarily hurt, but he answered regardless. “I keep having dreams about Umbridge in the forest with a giant beast.” Hermione rolled her eyes. That was plenty vague, wasn’t it?

“Does it kill her?” Harry asked excitedly.

“It’s *just* a dream, Harry,” Hermione said.

“Sometimes it does,” Ron said with a half-shrug, fully ignoring what Hermione said. “Sometimes she kills it, though.”

“So then it’s possible that Trelawney was just lying,” Hermione said.

“She wasn’t lying,” Ron said sharply.

“Why are you defending that woman? She’s a terrible professor.”

“I suppose you’d rather Umbridge pick someone instead?” Ron snapped back. Hermione jumped to her feet.

“No, of course not! You’re just saying this because Trelawney is the only one who —”

“What’s going on?” Regulus asked as he came into the common room. He was limping again, walking with an awkward gait with his hands tucked into his cloak pockets.

“Hermione is upset because she isn’t good at Divination,” Luna said. Hermione had forgotten that she was in the common room with them. Hermione clacked her teeth together angrily.

“No, I’m not,” Hermione said furiously. She grabbed her belongings in a hurricane of movement and stomped up to the girl’s dormitory.

“Do you think O.W.L.s are making her crazy?” she heard Ron ask right before she was out of shot to hear him.

She clacked her teeth together again, throwing her stuff haphazardly on the bed and stomping into the bathroom to take a shower. No one ever listened to her. She was just trying to help them, why wouldn’t they just listen to her? Regulus was the only one who even tried, but he was barely around anymore. It didn’t help that he had been given another week of detention after hexing Harry in the middle of class. Hermione didn’t fully understand why he’d done that, but Harry just grumbled something about Regulus trying to watch out for him.

She was so annoyed. It felt like every time she opened her mouth, she was shut down. Why did she even bother? She ground her teeth together. It felt like she was always fighting an uphill battle and it was just so — so — she huffed — so lonely. She felt like no one understood how she felt. No one could see what she was going through, and they always refused to do so much as listen.

Her teeth hurt the next morning when she first woke up, and she wondered if she had been clenching them in her sleep, grinding them together all night long. It felt a bit like when she would lose a baby tooth and an adult tooth would grow in.

Umbridge inspected Transfiguration and Care of Magical Creatures that day. The confrontation between Umbridge and McGonagall put Hermione on edge in a way she couldn't fully articulate. It felt like there was a constant threat living just around the corner now that Umbridge was inspecting their professors.

Care of Magical Creatures was just as bad, though Hermione was grateful that Hagrid wasn't there. Harry was nearly given a detention during class when Umbridge asked about students being hurt during class.

"That was me," Malfoy said. "I was slashed by a hippogriff."

"A hippogriff?" Umbridge asked, scribbling quickly on her clipboard.

"Only because he was too stupid to listen to what Hagrid told him to do," Harry said angrily. Hermione ground her teeth together in frustration. Regulus was clearly worried about Harry's outbursts in front of Umbridge, and now in the one class that Regulus wasn't with them, Harry had to open his mouth.

Umbridge turned to him slowly, a menacing light in her eyes, but as she opened her mouth, Malfoy interrupted. "I'd be happy to tell you more about it if you want to meet after class," he said. Umbridge looked over at him just as Malfoy smiled.

Hermione blinked, then blinked again. His smile was so bright that it felt like it blinded her for a long moment. Umbridge herself seemed a bit dazzled by it. Hermione didn't think she'd ever seen Malfoy smile like that, he looked almost... charming. She looked over at her friends to see Ron staring at Malfoy with a dazed look of incredulity. Harry just looked annoyed, rolling his eyes so hard that it must have hurt. He seemed completely unaffected by Malfoy's smile.

Hermione spent the rest of the day after class in the library again, working on her homework. However, she kept feeling like Malfoy's blazing smile had somehow affected her vision. It seemed like things were blurrier than usual. She had to hold her book at the right angle to make sure she could read it. She would have to look into it. Surely a smile couldn't actually blind someone.

She went back to the common room after eating dinner late in the Great Hall, she was alone again, most of her friends having eaten earlier. She was wondering if Ron and Harry were once again at Quidditch practice when she saw Ron was in the common room.

“Where’s Harry?” she asked as she took a seat on the floor next to Ron, he was leaning against the couch staring into the fire.

He looked at her briefly before looking away and shrugging.

“What?” she prompted.

“He said he had to call —” he paused to look around the room to make sure they were alone, “to call Padfoot, but he forgot to grab the mirror.”

Hermione stared at him for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“He didn’t actually take the mirror with him when he closed his curtains,” Ron said. “I think he’s hiding something.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I’m sure he’s not hiding anything. He’s probably just tired.”

“I guess,” he said. They fell into a companionable silence, and she pulled out her book to read while Ron moved over to the chess table. It was nearly midnight by the time Regulus made it back to the common room.

He was messing with his hand. It looked like it was wrapped in a bandage, but he quickly shoved it in his pocket when he noticed them sitting there.

“Hey,” he said evenly. He looked drained. Hermione sat up taller.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Fine,” he replied with an elegant shrug. He eyed the stairs like he was thinking of walking past them to go to bed, but ultimately walked over and sat next to Hermione. They talked idly for a bit, mostly about Umbridge and classes.

“Why weren’t you in Care of Magical Creatures?” Ron asked. He was staring at the chessboard with an intense focus that he never applied to any other part of his life.

“I’ve decided to drop it for the time being,” Regulus said.

“You dropped it?” Hermione yelled. Regulus nodded with a small wince.

“I’m still planning to take the O.W.L. at the end of the year, but I’m going to study on my own.”

“I didn’t realize that was an option,” Ron said curiously.

Regulus shrugged again. “It’s not usually, but McGonagall made an exception for me,” he said. There was a light blush on his cheeks that made her not want to question him.

“Malfoy was awful in class today when Umbridge showed up,” Hermione said, changing the subject.

“Wonder what terrible things Malfoy told her afterward,” Ron muttered unhappily, an angry frown etched into his serious face.

“Yeah, I wonder that too,” Hermione confessed with a frown. “I wish we could do something, get rid of her or something.”

“Unless you plan on shoving her off the Astronomy Tower, there’s not much we can do,” Regulus said. Ron chuckled, but Hermione pursed her lips. She didn’t think it was a good time to be joking about such things.

“You know, I was thinking today,” she said, shooting a nervous look over at Regulus. He probably wouldn’t like what she wanted to say, especially given that it was likely to put Harry in danger, but they were in danger regardless and they had to do something. “I was thinking that maybe the time’s come when we should just do it ourselves.”

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked, giving her a curious look. It was the first look he’d given her that wasn’t at least partially distracted in weeks. She took a deep breath in through her nose, realizing suddenly that she could smell dittany and the faint scent of blood.

“Well, learn Defense Against the Dark Arts ourselves,” she said, before sniffing again. The smell was coming from Regulus. That was odd, she’d never been able to smell dittany on him before. Perhaps he’d never used it around her. She didn’t think her ability to smell had improved that much.

“You want us to do extra work? D’you —” Ron started to say.

“You want us to learn Defense ourselves outside of class?” Regulus interrupted. “Like a dueling club?”

“No, I was thinking that we need a teacher,” she said, fiddling with her sweater uncomfortably.

Regulus hummed thoughtfully. “Who did you have in mind? I don’t think Lupin is nearby right now, he’s the only one I know with experience teaching.”

“I was actually thinking you could do it,” Hermione said, before lowering her voice to a whisper. “Or Harry.”

“What was that?” Regulus asked. Hermione took a sturdy breath.

“Harry could teach us, after everything he learned last year,” she said.

Regulus was quiet for a long time. Even Ron didn’t reply. He stared contemplatively into the fire. Hermione’s nose twitched slightly as she breathed him in again. Yep, there was definitely blood. Had Regulus hurt himself? Was he bleeding? Was that what the dittany was for?

“Let me think on it,” he said. “You can always ask Harry though. He might be willing.” He stood up after he was finished speaking, and walked slowly up to the dorm after bidding them good night.

“I didn’t think he would be that receptive,” Ron said softly once Regulus was gone.

“He didn’t exactly say yes,” Hermione said. “Did you notice his smell?”

Ron froze for a second before looking up from his chess game. “His smell?” he said with a chuckle, tilting his head to the side.

“Yes,” she said, blushing furiously. “He smelled like dittany.” Ron laughed again.

“No, I didn’t smell anything,” he replied. “Anyway, I better go to bed.” She waved to him as he left, the thought of Regulus lingering in her head. She rubbed her face with both hands as she mulled it over. Maybe she was imagining it.

the boathouse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It took Regulus nearly three weeks to translate the book Severus gave him from Greek to English. He thought about asking Kreacher to bring him more books from the muggle library where he found the language books last time, but ultimately he decided against it, opting instead to use the few translation books that were available to him in the Hogwarts library. He was surprised by the limited variety, but luckily there was enough there for him to get the job done.

It felt a bit like it had when he had to translate the Norse spell all those years ago, the main difference being that Greek magic was far more complicated than anything he had ever come in contact with. He felt like was missing a huge amount of background information while trying to translate, as if there was an entire basis for every magical word and choice that he didn't have access to.

In the end, he translated just enough to feel comfortable using the information. He understood why it wasn't in the Restricted Section anymore though. Similar to the Norse spell that had nearly killed him, it involved changing his magical core in a way that would scare off most wizards. It was dangerous stuff to mess with, he knew that very well, but there was a part of Regulus that just didn't care.

If asked, he would say that he just needed to heal, that he had to protect Harry, that he needed to be as powerful as possible to do what needed to be done, but in the quiet shadows of the late evenings stuck in the library, a voice in the back of his head would whisper, *who cares?* And that was really the crux of it all.

If this killed him, or damaged his magical core more than it already was damaged, then what did it matter? He didn't feel particularly useful before the damage was done, Harry had been put in danger plenty of times even when Regulus was in good shape. Why would it matter if something happened to him now? He wasn't doing much to help when it really came down to it.

There was also the terrible conclusion that without James, without any connection to the man he had once loved, who he currently loved, why did it matter if he continued on? For the first time in years, he thought about the prospect of surviving the war.

He knew it wasn't likely. The Dark Lord was gaining power quickly, and there seemed to be danger around every corner. There would be another war. Regulus was sure he wouldn't survive it. But now that he was alone —not just from spending most of his time isolated from the few living people he knew, but also from separation from whatever terrible ghost creature James was — the idea of what the future might hold for him rose out of the Black Lake like a terrible sea monster.

It felt like staring into the abyss, an endless spread of nothingness, loneliness, and purposelessness. He didn't really see a point in it most of the time, the rest of the time he looked at it with an aching terror that never quite seemed to leave him. He wasn't sure that he ever wanted to face it, that he even wanted to survive. So what did it matter if this illegal Greek magic destroyed him beyond repair?

He was probably depressed. That's what he thought during his more logical moments, but those moments came infrequently and grew further apart each time they visited. He wasn't speaking to anyone. Not really. He would talk to Harry during their preparations, but mostly he sent Harry away to read up on the theories he needed to know. He didn't really talk to anyone else at school. He and Sirius still weren't on speaking terms, and it wasn't like Severus had ever been much of a conversationalist. No, Regulus was alone, as he had always been.

He woke up early one Sunday morning just after sunrise. Before getting out of bed he cast his morning incantation, every sunrise and sunset it needed to be cast. He was glad that it was Sunday. There wouldn't be much to do that day, though he didn't want to hang around doing homework with the other teenagers. He never did, but he was especially apathetic about it this year.

He threw on one of his heavier cloaks and left the dorm before any of his dorm mates woke. He took the long way through the castle, exiting outside, and eventually making the long trek down to the boathouse.

He wasn't sure why the boathouse had become such an important place for him. He had never visited it during his first life, and he hadn't thought about it during the first few years of his second life. However, once Umbridge infiltrated the castle, Regulus felt like he needed a place where he could go to hide, especially one that had no previous emotional ties for him. The boathouse was almost always empty, the only person who frequented it was Hagrid, and he still wasn't back from whatever Order mission he had been sent on. Though it was an odd place, it was perfect for what he needed.

He liked being in the boathouse. The noise of the lake brushing up against the shore and the sides of the building created a lull inside him that always calmed his stress. He cast a warming charm once he was inside and climbed into one of the boats that were tied inside the boathouse, still floating in the water from the last time it was used. He laid back in it like a coffin and pulled out his *kolossoi*, an odd doll-like object that he made out of wax and cloth.

The spell itself involved using crystal rods to puncture the doll in different places to replicate the process of anchoring his magic and his soul to his physical body. Or at least, that was his understanding of it. He took a few deep breaths before shifting the crystal rods around, under his breath, he sang the *Æphodí*, a type of enchantment that could only be sung rather than spoken. He didn't fully understand the words, but he didn't need to.

Like all other times that he used this spell, the effect was immediate. He closed his eyes, cradling the *kolossoi* to his chest. There was a breeze that crossed over his face in a direction that would have been impossible for real wind given where he was in the boathouse. He breathed it in with a delighted sigh, evergreen trees and the scent of someone making

cinnamon bread. It was a peculiar smell, but it was always the first thing he encountered when he cast this spell.

The first time he had done it his heart had been racing in his chest as he leaned back in his dorm room, the curtains charmed closed, but the moment that scent hit his nose, it was like being nestled in a soft blanket of safety. All his worries and anxieties drifted away with it. That happened now too, the depression and terror that seemed to haunt him nowadays left him as he sunk deep into the magic.

The next thing that came was pain, but not in the way he was used to. It wasn't a physical pain, but a metaphysical pain, a magical pain. It was like someone was taking his magical core and stretching it out like a muscle after a long Quidditch game. It stung, and he would hiss out his pain through his teeth, but it also felt so good that his eyes would roll back up in his head.

He didn't quite understand it. Sometimes he could feel hands doing the stretching, touching him and fixing him, though he never knew if this was real or if his brain just had to attach some sort of real-world experience to something that was so far beyond his worldly understanding.

It was a bit odd though. The hands themselves were not anything that he had encountered in the real world. He was barely ever touched, especially in a way that was so purposeful. As he searched his memories, the only people he could remember touching him like that were James and Barty.

It wasn't sexual exactly, but it also wasn't *not* sexual. He thought that maybe it was only nonsexual because his magical core didn't have the capability to experience sexual pleasure. Yet at the same time, he thought he only attached it to anything sexual as a comparison because he had never experienced that sort of pain and pleasure working hand in hand as he did while having sex with something.

The odd part was the way the hands felt. They felt smaller than his hands and much softer. There was a strength there, sure, but it wasn't like the strength that James held in his hands. It wasn't muscular strength. It was the kind of strength someone gained from kneading bread, from gardening, from making potions. It was different, it was purposeful.

He grunted, his body twitching and arching as he experienced the waves of pain and release that came with this spell each time. He was so all-consumed by it that he barely even thought about the danger until after the fact. The thing was, in this state of being, where he was cracked open by a binding spell, where he was tied to a doll and a few crystal rods, he was always right on the precipice of death.

He wasn't sure how he knew that exactly, but it was like if something went slightly wrong, if he was pushed even slightly in the wrong direction, he would tumble over the edge. He didn't think he would even mind all that much, a death like this would be far better than whatever death lay in wait for him out in the world. He would trip and fall, careening down, and he would disappear. That was a death he could accept.

After the pain and the release, came what he had begun to refer to as the earthquake. He softly began to sing again, another *Æphodi*, this one slightly different than the first. It made him a bit more aware of his body. The hands would grab him and yank him up, not truly, not physically, but in his mind, in his soul.

They would drag him up and then, for all intents and purposes, begin to push him around. Every time the hands touched his body, he felt like the *kolossoi* doll. Like he was no longer made of flesh, blood, and bone, but instead of wax and cloth. He felt as unreal as he could possibly feel. He didn't understand the purpose of this part of the ritual, but by the end of it he was too dizzy and disoriented to realize that he was coming back to the surface. He felt like he was being reborn and reshaped each time.

The final part was all color, the feelings gone, or tucked away behind a metal door. He would see, behind his eyes, violent greens and reds, shooting through the air and drifting past him like tree branches in the wind. Slowly they would vanish like he was being buried alive, and when it finally ended, when he opened his eyes, it was like someone had taken pity on him, had dug him out of his shallow grave, and he was awake once again. Whole and alive.

He stayed in the boat for a while after the ritual was finished, but eventually pulled out his journal where he kept all his notes. He tried to keep detailed accounts of what happened each time, though after several attempts it was starting to get a little repetitive. His body always hurt after it was done, though that wasn't anything new, but it was a different, unique kind of ache that seemed to originate in his bloodstream. It was like the magic in his veins was trying to escape, as if it was unhappy to be housed in such an abusive vessel.

Well, too bad, Regulus thought. *If I have to stick around, then so do you.*

He climbed out of the boat just a bit later, trying out a few spells and jotting down his improvements. It wasn't much, but there was a slight change as time went on. He didn't know if that was actually the ritual helping him, or if it was just the passage of time. He wasn't sure he would know until the very end.

Above the two boats that sat in the water, were two boats that hung from the ceiling above. Once he was finished with his ritual, his first order of business, so to speak, was to lower one of the other boats enough so that it hovered before him like a makeshift desk. Just the fact that he was able to maintain that sort of magic now made him hopeful for the future. He wouldn't be useless for long. Though the nerve damage pain persisted, at least he would be able to cast.

The boat was covered in a black rug that Regulus had stolen from inside the castle, he pulled it off, folding it over itself, to reveal the potion set he had beneath. It had taken a lot of practice to get everything done correctly, but he felt confident that he finally had the potion just right. There wasn't much left to add to it, only the two final ingredients. He recovered it with the rug and cast another charm to protect it from prying eyes, before heading back up to the castle.

He had been busy — the regular rituals, his homework for classes, the daily incantations, the prep he had to do with Harry — it had been draining him and one important thing had fallen

by the wayside: his hunt for the Horcruxes. He needed to move something forward, he needed to do something, otherwise, he might truly lose his mind.

He found Luna quickly, using the map to spot her in one of the dungeon corridors. She did always have a tendency to wander, and he knew she was lonely during the weekend. He wished he could get her to spend more time with Harry and his friends, but she was hard to reach during the day, only drifting around to find them when it was late in the evening.

“Hey, Luna,” he said as he walked around the corner. She was staring at the ceiling, and it took Regulus a long second to realize that she was looking at a door that led out of the wall eight feet off the ground. “What’s that?”

“A secret, I think,” Luna said softly, dragging her eyes away. “What do you need, Regulus?”

“Who says I need something?” Regulus said, partially distracted by the mysterious door. He looked down at her after she didn’t reply, she was smiling blankly at him.

“You came to find me, that means you need something. How can I help?” She didn’t sound annoyed, but he felt bad anyway.

“Sorry,” he said. She shrugged one shoulder, but her smile didn’t diminish. “I wanted to ask you about the books kept in the Ravenclaw Common Room. Pince mentioned that Ravenclaw practically has its own library up there.”

“That’s true,” Luna said. “Though I don’t really like to read. What kind of book are you looking for?”

“Anything about the founders of Hogwarts, I’m researching some of their famous objects,” he said vaguely. She gave him a look that he thought meant she was searching him for something, but it was always so hard to read her.

“Would you like me to show you?” Luna asked finally.

“That would be great,” he said, relaxing slightly. It took nearly twenty minutes to make it all the way to the top of Ravenclaw Tower — Regulus thought his legs might collapse under him as they walked up all the stairs — but eventually, they made it to a large door with a bronze raven knocker on the front. The raven sprung to life once they were before it.

“What goes in dry and comes out wet, the longer it is in, the stronger it gets?” the raven croaked.

“A riddle?” Regulus asked, somehow it had never occurred to him that there could be common rooms without traditional passwords. Luna nodded, though she didn’t reply. She had a pensive look on her face.

Regulus mulled over the riddle, trying to remember what it all was. It goes in dry and comes out wet. A swimmer, maybe? But it gets stronger the longer it’s in. Maybe a pickle, he thought sardonically.

“Do you have to answer a riddle every single time?” Regulus asked.

“Yes,” Luna replied. “But it’s okay. This one is a Tom riddle.”

“Huh?” Regulus said dumbly.

She looked at him for a split second. “It’s Voldemort,” she said.

“Well reasoned,” the raven croaked, the door swinging open.

“What?” Regulus said loudly, but Luna was already gliding through the doorway. He jumped to follow her, not keen on being left outside to answer another riddle by himself, especially given that he didn’t understand the first one at all.

The inside of the Ravenclaw Common Room was extremely airy, nearly the opposite of the Gryffindor one which was cozy and warm. It was nice though, he could picture himself here, doing homework and relaxing after a long day of classes. It was nearly empty this time of day which was convenient, he didn’t feel like answering questions or dealing with too many prying eyes.

“Here is the library,” Luna said. He wandered over to where she was standing. In front of her was a large white statue of Rowena Ravenclaw, behind the statue, Regulus could make out the doors that must have led to the dorm rooms. To the left of the statue was a slim archway that was covered by a thick curtain. Luna pushed it aside to reveal a tight room filled to the brim with stacks and stacks of books.

Regulus moved to walk in, glancing at the statue one last time, only to stop when he realized she was wearing a diadem. It must have been the lost one, he had never seen another statue of her, but he was certain that there wouldn’t be one where she just so happened to be wearing a different diadem.

“Luna,” he said distractedly.

“Yes,” she asked, still standing next to him holding the curtain open.

“What do you know about the lost diadem?” he said, gesturing to the statue.

“Not much,” she said, tilting her head thoughtfully. “Beyond that Helena was the one to steal it.”

“Right,” he said, he already knew that after Lupin found out about it in his research. “Do you think there are books about that in here?” He looked at the piles of books feeling slightly intimidated by the way they were organized, or not organized.

Luna hummed. “You could always ask her,” she said.

“Ask her?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “The Grey Lady, she’s a ghost here. Didn’t you know that?”

“I did, but I — I just hadn’t thought about it I guess.” Of course, he knew that the Grey Lady was the ghost who represented the Ravenclaw house, but he had never thought to ask who

that ghost actually was. He hadn't even realized that it was Helena, though in retrospect it made sense. He wondered how the Dark Lord found the diadem in the first place. Did his hunt start at Hogwarts?

"She is quite shy," Luna said with a nod, misinterpreting his silence. "It's difficult to get her to speak with you, but with some persistence, I find she is just as amendable."

"Where would I find her?" he asked.

"I'll show you," Luna said, a cheerful look on her face like she had just been waiting for someone to ask.

They left the Ravenclaw Common Room, Regulus immediately mourning the prospect of sitting down and resting for a while before tackling the long spiral staircase that they had just climbed, and made their way outside to the suspension bridge that connected Ravenclaw Tower to some of the classrooms. Regulus almost never walked out on the bridge. The cold wind cut through the tall walls of the castle, and he had to wrap his cloak tighter around himself to keep the warmth in.

"She likes to linger on this bridge during the day," Luna said before pointing to the far end. "I think it's best if you speak alone. Good luck, Regulus."

"Thanks, Luna," he said, shivering against the cold. Luna smiled blandly before turning to walk back into the castle.

He didn't see Helena at first, it didn't look like anyone was out here — not that anyone should have been on a bridge this frigid — but once he made it halfway across, he noticed her floating behind a piece of suspension. She was facing out toward the Black Lake, staring off into the distance.

"Hello, Grey Lady?" he called. She twisted away from him instantly like she was going to head straight through the castle wall. "Wait!"

"I don't go by that name!" she called over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "It's Helena, right?"

She paused but did not turn. "What do you want?"

"I just wanted to speak with you," Regulus said. "Luna, my friend, told me you might be able to help me."

"You are friends with Luna?" she asked, finally turning to look at him.

"Yes," he said, pausing only a moment before he decided to dive in headfirst. "I was friends with her mother once, Pandora. You might have known her."

Helena softened slightly. "Pandora," she breathed. "I did know her."

"I wanted to ask you something if that's alright," he said.

She looked at him suspiciously but finally gave a tight nod.

“I was wondering if you could tell me anything you know about the lost diadem.” A cold smile crossed her ghostly face. Regulus would have shivered upon seeing it if his body wasn’t practically vibrating against the icy wind.

“I’m afraid I cannot help you.” She spoke with a condemnation that Regulus couldn’t decipher.

“Wait!” he said desperately. “Please, it’s vital.”

“You are not the first student to covet the diadem —”

“I’m trying to destroy it,” he replied instantly. Helena froze, her eyes searching his face. “Did you —” he paused, hoping against hope that she wouldn’t react badly to his next words. “Did you tell another student where you hid it?”

She didn’t look angry, which surprised him. Instead, she looked ashamed. “He was so flattering. He seemed to understand me, to sympathize...”

“He’s very good at that,” Regulus said, though the version of the Dark Lord he knew was never that charismatic. He could imagine his teenage self being less threatening. “You weren’t the first person that the Da — Tom Riddle tricked.” He stopped speaking as his own words sunk in. “Oh, a Tom Riddle,” he whispered, thinking of Luna and her unusual answer to the Ravenclaw raven’s riddle.

Helena tilted her head slightly as he spoke to himself, but she did not reply. She looked sad, pitying almost which Regulus bristled at. She was the one who led the Dark Lord to the diadem, not him.

“Do you know what he did with it? After he found it, do you know where he hid it?”

“I only saw him here one other time after he left Hogwarts,” she said, speaking so softly that her voice was almost carried off with the wind.

“When was that?” he asked.

“A few years after he graduated. I believe he came back to speak to Dumbledore about something.”

“Speak to Dumbledore?” he muttered. “I see. Well, thank you, Helena.”

“Do you truly plan to destroy it?” she asked. He nodded. She seemed to relax, her face going slack with relief. He turned away from her, a feeling of discomfort in his chest. The damage the Dark Lord had done was so widespread, it festered in every part of the wizarding world, even the ghosts at Hogwarts were haunted by him.

However, Regulus was one step closer to killing him. He had one more piece of vital information, something Dumbledore had failed to mention to him. He needed to speak with the man as soon as possible.

Chapter End Notes

the actual answer to the riddle in this chapter is a teabag, however, i thought it was funny to have luna provide a slightly nonsensical answer. she says tom riddle because of him in the chamber of secrets (goes in dry, comes out wet, the longer he's inside, the stronger he gets).

the metamorphosis part II.

They were too swamped with schoolwork over the next two weeks to revisit the subject of learning Defense Against the Dark Arts on their own. Harry and Regulus were spending more time away, though Hermione wasn't sure whether they were doing something together or separately. Ron was clearly suspicious of what they were hiding though as he brought it up several times.

"I mean, both of them will be gone from the dorm until late at night! I swear they're up to something. Aren't you mad that they're not including us?" Ron repeated once again. They were in the library working on Potions waiting for Regulus and Harry to join them.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, Ron." She fiddled with the ends of her hair. She had been leaning too far over on her parchment and now had ink on her hair, causing the ends to stick together. "Why don't you use your *seer* skills to figure it out?" she said acidly.

Ron was silent. She turned to snap at him, to tell him that she was just kidding when Regulus and Harry finally joined them. Regulus looked frustrated, but he didn't seem like he wanted to talk about it, Harry seemed unbothered so she didn't bring it up. They worked together for a bit before Hermione decided to broach the topic that she'd been thinking about. It wasn't often that they were all together so she had to take advantage.

"I was wondering," she said softly, "whether you'd thought any more about Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry looked incredulous, but Regulus was the one to respond.

"How would we do it?" Regulus asked.

Hermione froze for a second, she hadn't admitted it to herself, but she had been expecting Regulus to reject her idea outright. She was mostly hoping that Harry would be the one to agree.

"Well, I was thinking we could just get a small group together — only people that we trust — and then you could run lessons," Hermione said. "I have some ideas. I thought we could start with what's tested on our O.W.L.s."

"Okay," Regulus said. "We'll have to be careful. Umbridge cannot find out."

"And you'll teach us?" Ron asked.

"No," Regulus said. Hermione startled in her seat. "Harry is going to teach you."

"What?" Harry said, far too loudly. Madam Pince hushed them loudly from the other side of the library. "What?" he repeated.

“Harry knows plenty. I’ll help, but Harry should be the one to teach you.” Regulus grinned for a second. Hermione blushed, even though Regulus wasn’t grinning at her specifically. She shook her head, embarrassed. She had already agreed to bury her misguided crush on Regulus Black; she would not allow herself to be pulled back in.

“Who would want to be taught by me? I’m crazy,” Harry said. Regulus rolled his eyes, but his smile didn’t dim.

“Being crazy and being a good teacher are not mutually exclusive,” Regulus responded.

“How did you come up with this idea at all?” Ron asked Hermione, sounding tired and bored like this wasn’t an amazing opportunity, but instead a terrible chore he was being asked to complete.

“Well,” Hermione said slowly, imploring Ron to listen to her, “I was speaking to Viktor, and he mentioned that Harry —”

“Viktor?” Ron said, his face souring instantly.

“Here we go,” she heard Harry mutter.

“Yes, Ron. Viktor. Is that a problem?” Hermione replied sharply.

“No,” Ron said, though he was clearly lying. “Just didn’t know you still talked to him, that’s all. He’s a bit old for you, isn’t he?”

Hermione looked at Regulus and Harry, hoping they would back her up, but alas Harry was already sinking into himself like he did whenever they fought, and Regulus just looked curious, his lips pursed like he was deep in thought about something.

“He’s just a friend,” Hermione replied when she realized that neither of the other two boys would help her. “I don’t understand why he bothers you so much. I’m allowed to have a pen pal, aren’t I?”

“I guess,” Ron said snidely.

“What did Viktor say exactly?” Regulus interrupted to ask.

“He said that Harry knew things that even he didn’t know, he said he would be a good person to learn from. I figured since Harry learned from you, then you would be the best person to ask.”

Regulus nodded, Harry beamed with a pride that she didn’t see on his face very often. She doubted it had to do with his own skill, he was never that self-boasting.

“Do you have an idea of who we’ll invite?” Regulus asked.

“Yes, I can bring it up to them. I was thinking we could meet during the next Hogsmeade trip. It’s this coming weekend,” Hermione responded, her voice businesslike. She wanted him to take this seriously, she needed this to work; she would not allow them to fail their O.W.L.s.

“During the next Hogsmeade trip?” Ron groaned. “But I wanted to go to Sprintwitches Sporting Needs. I need some good Keeper gloves.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at him again. “This is far more important than Quidditch, Ron.” Both Ron and Harry gasped in outrage, Regulus looked away, his lips twitching like he was trying very hard not to laugh.

“I’m sure you can visit Sprintwitches afterward,” Regulus said. “Where in Hogsmeade?”

“Er,” she said quietly. She had been hoping he wouldn’t ask, it wasn’t exactly the most normal place. “The Hog’s Head.”

Regulus really did laugh then. “Oh, I see. We have to go to a seedy bar to do this.”

Hermione bristled slightly. “Well, I just figured the other professors would be less likely to catch us there.”

“We’re not doing anything wrong, are we?” Harry asked.

“We won’t be breaking any rules during this meeting,” Hermione said evasively.

“Umbridge is probably worried about us building an army against her,” Regulus cut in to say. “So if she finds out that we are learning Defense on our own, then she is definitely going to crack down on the group.”

“Oh, alright,” Harry said, looking away from them with a pensive expression on his face. He looked like that a lot nowadays.

“So, it’ll be vitally important that no one tells anyone else.” Regulus steepled his fingers thoughtfully.

“I have an idea for that,” Hermione said, leaning forward so that she could whisper quietly. She was quite proud of this idea and had been working on it all summer. “There is this jinx that binds someone to their name on a piece of paper, so if they tell anyone, *sneak* will break out across their face in boils.”

“Godric,” Ron breathed.

“Wow,” Harry said at the same time.

Regulus looked shocked, but he schooled his expression quickly. Not quickly enough that she didn’t catch it, but still.

“That sounds a bit... intense,” Regulus said, speaking a bit like he was trying to quell an angry animal.

“You said yourself that Umbridge can’t know!” Hermione defended.

“Yes, but that seems a bit too retaliatory. Perhaps we should think of something that will keep them from telling her at all, rather than something that will punish them after the fact.”

“I guess,” Hermione grumbled, disappointed.

Regulus leaned back in his chair, furrowing his eyebrows for a moment. “Did you already figure out how to tie it to a piece of paper?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said, though with less enthusiasm than before.

“Okay, that’s helpful. What if we did a modified tongue-tying jinx? That way anyone that signed it wouldn’t be able to speak about the group regardless of if they wanted to or not.”

Hermione felt herself light up. “Of course, yes, I think I could do that.”

“Perfect,” Regulus said with a gentle smile. She hopped slightly in her seat before she could contain her excitement. Her friends gave her odd looks, and she blushed furiously under their scrutiny. She didn’t know why she reacted that way.

She spent the rest of the evening designing the spell and the paper they would all sign. It was the only way to keep them all safe, and Regulus was right, unfortunately, that her plan would still allow them to be discovered. She couldn’t deny that she felt embarrassed about suggesting the other way. In retrospect, it seemed obvious. She wondered if something was wrong with her. She wanted so badly to punish whoever dared tell on them, it almost seemed more important than protecting their secret in the first place.

She was walking back to the common room when she noticed an odd taste in her mouth. She hadn’t realized at the time, too distracted by everything that was happening, but she had begun combing through the ends of her hair with her teeth as if trying to clean off the ink with her mouth. She spat out the taste, cringing in disgust.

There was definitely something wrong with her vision. That or she had stayed up far too late the night before. She didn’t know why, but every night she felt like she needed to stay awake longer and longer. It was destroying her sleep schedule, especially considering how badly she just wanted to sleep during the day. She was trying to hide it, but she thought that her dorm mates had noticed how ragged she was running herself.

Regardless, as she was walking into Hogsmeade that morning after dragging, truly dragging, herself out of bed, she was having trouble making out the signs she could usually read easily. She didn’t know what was going on. It seemed weird to her that she would develop eyesight issues so quickly, but it also felt far too slow for a normal magical reason. It was concerning, but she put it aside for the time being. She had a meeting to attend.

She walked into the Hog’s Head with her friends: Ron and Luna directly behind her talking about something or other, and Harry and Regulus a few paces behind them both walking silently with their hands tucked into their pockets. Regulus seemed unaffected, but Harry seemed like he was barely holding back his nervousness.

The meeting went as well as she could have hoped. Nearly twenty students showed up. It was a bit intimidating at first, she stumbled over her words as she tried to explain what they were there to do, then it all hit a snag when a few students, including Zacharias Smith, a Hufflepuff

student, started pestering Harry about Voldemort, but Susan Bones, another Hufflepuff, got them back on track by asking Harry about his patronus.

After that, various members of the group seemed to devolve into lamenting about everything Harry had already done, much to Harry's chagrin, his cheeks blazing red. Regulus kept giving him that proud, fatherly look.

"Look. I don't want to sound like I'm trying to be modest or anything," Harry said modestly, "but I had a lot of help with all that stuff."

"That's the whole point, isn't it?" Regulus responded before anyone could intervene. "No one learns these things on their own, none of us will succeed alone. That's why it's important that we start this group. If we want to be well prepared," he glanced at Hermione quickly, "and to pass our O.W.L.s then we have to work together."

Hermione smiled brightly, a few other people nodding in agreement.

"Well, then, the next question is how often should we meet," Hermione said. It took a bit to settle everything, but they were still missing a very important detail. They had nowhere safe to meet. However, she still felt satisfied with the meeting. "I think everybody should write their name down so we know who was here."

Ernie and Zacharias looked uncomfortable about signing though and the tension that was already running through her body got even worse. She raised her eyebrows in challenge.

"We're prefects," Ernie said imploringly. "If this list is found..."

"It won't be," Regulus said, standing up for the first time since the meeting began. He had grown a lot taller over the last few months, she noticed. "I'm going to charm it so that no one else can read the names."

Ernie still looked uncomfortable, glancing at his friend uncertainly.

"Of course," Regulus continued haughtily, "you can always not sign and leave now. You won't be invited back though."

Ernie sighed, looking resigned, but agreed to sign. Hermione shot Regulus a grateful look, but he didn't see her. He had a pensive look on his face like he thought something was missing.

"That Zacharias bloke's a wart," Ron said after everyone had left.

"I don't like him either," she said, explaining that he had overheard her inviting Ernie and Hannah and that she couldn't leave him out after that. "But the more people the better. I don't think Michael Corner and his friends would have come if he wasn't going out with Ginny."

"He's WHAT?" Ron said.

She rolled her eyes, explaining to Ron how Ginny and Michael had met. Honestly, boys were so unobservant.

“I thought Ginny fancied Harry!” Ron yelled. Harry looked up curiously from where he had drifted off, a confused and caught look on his face. Regulus’s lips twitched.

“Ginny used to fancy Harry, but she gave up on him months ago,” Hermione said. Regulus really did laugh then, though none of them seemed to be able to figure out why he was laughing.

Hermione felt triumphant the rest of the day. She truly felt like she had accomplished something. Bizarrely, she kept hopping excitedly every time she thought about how well the meeting went, even with the snags they hit along the way.

It was probably this triumphant feeling that kept her from realizing what was going on in her mouth. It was later that night, and she was curled in her bed, one of her textbooks open on her lap — she was in the middle of a reread, of course, she had finished the book long before classes began — when she realized that she was once again grinding her teeth together without noticing.

She stopped and touched them gingerly with a few fingers, they hurt slightly like the grinding she was doing was permanently damaging them. At this rate, her dentist parents were going to make her sleep with a mouth guard. While touching some of her bottom teeth she noticed something truly odd.

Her teeth were just a bit too long. She was sure of it. She rushed to the bathroom, baring all her teeth in the mirror. Sure enough, random teeth were longer than others, looking jagged in her mouth. She let out a quiet noise of distress. What was happening to her? Was it because of the time Madam Pomfrey shrunk her teeth? Why were they growing like this?

It was Wednesday night by the time they were able to find a place to have their first official meeting, and Hermione was very carefully avoiding thinking about her teeth problem. She had rushed to Madam Pomfrey the morning after she discovered it, and though Pomfrey wasn’t sure what was causing the problem, she was quick to fix it.

Hermione was also trying not to think about her damaged eyesight. She brought that up to Pomfrey as well, but Pomfrey only suggested that she invest in a pair of glasses. That was definitely not what Hermione wanted to hear. She didn’t know what was happening, but now that she started to notice issues, she knew for a fact that they were all connected. They had to be.

She followed Harry, Ron, and Luna up to the seventh floor. Dobby had told Harry about this place, and in retrospect, Hermione should have thought of it herself. She had heard it mentioned before when she read about it in an old diary of a Ravenclaw student from the late 1800s that was published into a novel. She had just been too distracted to come up with the solution herself, and that fact bothered her far more than she would have liked.

“Where is Regulus? Is he not coming?” Hermione asked nervously.

“He said he would, I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” Harry said, though he was frowning deeply as he said it.

“What’s wrong? Did you tell him about, you know…” Ron said. Hermione gave him a sharp look.

“About what?” she said. She hated the feeling of not knowing something. Harry glared at Ron for a second.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “And no, I haven’t.” He sighed angrily. “I just wish — I’m so sick of — I wish he would just talk to Sirius. Both of them are driving me insane, and I feel like Regulus is avoiding me because he doesn’t want to talk about it.”

“That makes sense,” Luna said.

“How does that make sense?” Hermione asked frustratedly.

“Sirius and Regulus were used as weapons against each other, it makes sense that they would have a poor relationship now.”

“How do you even know that?” Hermione asked. Luna shrugged but didn’t answer.

“I don’t know how to fix it,” Harry grumbled.

“Give them a common goal,” Luna replied with a nod. “What do they both care about?”

Harry looked thoughtful as he began walking back and forth in front of the blank wall where the door to the Room of Requirement appeared a moment later.

The room itself was quite impressive and absolutely perfect for their needs. It was spacious and open with cushions that would be perfect for stunning practice, as Ron was quick to point out. The walls were lined with trinkets and books on Defense that Hermione had never seen before.

“Wow! Harry, this is wonderful, there’s everything we need here!” A second later there was a knock at the door.

Their peers arrived quickly after that, Ginny, Neville, Lavender, and Parvati among the first to show. Regulus was last, coming in only five minutes later. Hermione gasped when she realized that he wasn’t alone.

“What are they doing here?” Ron asked sharply. Behind Regulus were two Slytherins: Theodore Nott and Daphne Greengrass. They both looked supremely uncomfortable and were half hiding behind Regulus who looked completely unfazed by Ron’s question.

“They’re here to learn just like the rest of you,” Regulus said blandly.

“But what if they tell someone?” Fred asked accusingly. Regulus spared him only a passing glance.

“They won’t be able to,” Regulus said. “The paper you all signed — that they signed as well — keeps everyone from talking about this group. There is no danger. Let’s get started.”

She didn't notice it at first, too distracted by the Slytherins's entrance, but Regulus looked odd. Though he was holding his face in a way that looked emotionless and detached, there was a tension around his eyes that she didn't see very often. She wondered if his nerve damage was acting up, he looked a bit like he was in pain.

The meeting went perfectly. They decided on a name, Dumbledore's Army, as coined by Ginny. Regulus flinched slightly when he heard it, but he didn't argue. The other Slytherins were awkward and didn't speak to anyone but each other, but they also didn't disturb the meeting. After spending nearly two hours practicing Expelliarmus, they dismissed everyone, leaving just Hermione, Ron, Harry, and Regulus in the room.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked Regulus quietly. He hadn't participated in the practice sections, opting instead to pace around the room, checking everyone's technique and offering corrections when he could.

"I'm fine," Regulus said with a wave of his hand, but he was paler than usual. "Shall we head back?"

"Actually," Harry said, clenching his jaw like he was fortifying himself. "There is something I want to talk to you about. Ron already knows but —"

"Knows about what?" Regulus said. There was a tension running up his back like he was having trouble standing, and Hermione wished he would just sit down already.

"I've been experiencing feelings," Harry said slowly, uncertainly like he had no idea what he was talking about.

"Feelings?" Regulus replied, like Harry was the biggest idiot to ever live.

"Voldemort's feelings," Ron jumped to say, giving Harry an equally bewildered look. "He's been feeling what Voldemort is feeling."

"What?" Regulus asked, his teeth clenched tightly. Hermione listened attentively as Harry described the waves of emotions he would get that he knew were coming from Voldemort. It was similar to the terrible vision he'd had in Divination in fourth year, except now it was happening randomly when he was awake.

"How long has this been going on for?" Hermione asked, alarmed. Harry looked extremely uncomfortable.

"A few months," he mumbled.

"What was that?" Regulus said. He sounded furious, and Hermione was grateful that she wasn't on the receiving end of that voice.

"A few months," Harry said a little louder. He didn't look ashamed though, he looked angry. "Which you would know if you and Sirius were talking."

Regulus's mouth dropped open. "Excuse me? Sirius knows about this?"

“Yes.” Harry crossed his arms angrily.

“And what does Sirius have to say about it?” Regulus growled. Harry, strangely, softened at that.

“He said that you might understand what was happening better than he did. He said that you needed to be included.” Regulus’s eyebrows raised halfway up his forehead. “Can you please just talk to him? For me?”

Regulus took a long moment to reply.

“Fine,” he said through his teeth. “But this conversation isn’t over.”

Harry’s shoulders sagged. “I know,” he said, sounding relieved. They walked back to the common room together, Harry keeping an eye on the map as they went to make sure they didn’t run into anyone.

Hermione couldn’t shake the feeling of unease though. Voldemort was somehow sharing his emotions with Harry? How was that even possible? It disturbed her, even as she walked into the common room and plopped tiredly into a chair in front of the fire.

“Er, Hermione,” Ron said quietly. “What are you doing?”

“What?” she asked distractedly, looking up to see Ron, Harry, and Regulus watching her uneasily.

“Why are you doing that with your mouth?”

“Doing what?” she said. The moment she said the words, her teeth clacked back together, and she began grinding them. She would have to go back to Pomfrey tomorrow, she could already feel her teeth getting longer.

“That can’t be good for your teeth,” Harry said, cringing slightly.

“It’s fine,” Hermione said, though she didn’t bother unclenching her teeth to say it so the words came out muffled.

“It’s weird,” Ron said with a look of disgust. “It looks like you’re bruxing.”

“Like she’s what?” Regulus asked.

“Bruxing, it’s a thing Scabbers — Pettigrew — whatever — used to do. Rats grind their teeth together like that. It’s called bruxing.”

“I’ve never heard of that,” Harry said.

“Well, you’ve never had a pet rat, have you?” Ron asked.

“Hermione,” Regulus said, a very odd look on his face. “Has anything else been going on? Anything weird?”

Hermione sunk into the seat, wishing they would all look away from her. She debated not telling them, but if anyone could help, she thought Regulus might be the one.

“My teeth keep growing,” she said, though once she started speaking she couldn’t seem to stop. “They keep getting longer. Pomfrey already had to fix them once, but it keeps getting worse.” She felt tears pool in her eyes. “And my vision is getting worse. And I can’t sleep at night, it’s like my body wants to be awake.”

“You’re becoming nocturnal?” Ron asked. Regulus pursed his lips for a second.

“You guys wait here, I’ll be right back,” he said before making his way up to the dorms.

“Think he realized something?” Harry asked.

“I’m sure he has,” Ron said, his voice suddenly softer. He was looking at Hermione now, the expression of disgust gone, replaced with one of sympathy. “Don’t worry, I’m sure Regulus can help.”

She relaxed slightly, though she didn't know if it was true, she appreciated Ron saying it. Regulus came back a handful of minutes later carrying a small vial of shimmery blue liquid.

“Drink this,” he said, coming to sit next to her.

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“It’s the antidote,” Regulus said. He bit his bottom lip as he said it like he was holding something back.

“Antidote?” Hermione shouted before quickly swallowing the potion. “Someone poisoned me?”

Regulus placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “In the future, I think you should avoid threatening to tell Molly what Fred and George are up to.”

“Fred and George did this?” Ron asked sharply.

Regulus nodded once. “Yes, I believe the exact words they used were *if she wants to be a rat that badly*.” Regulus cringed slightly, looking apologetic. However, there was also a slight smile there that he was clearly trying to hide.

“They were testing their stuff on first years!” she shouted.

“And we’re running a forbidden defense group called *Dumbledore’s Army*,” he said with great emphasis. “Sometimes you have to choose loyalty instead of deciding yourself who and who doesn’t deserve to be punished. Just be glad that Fred and George aren’t Slytherins. Now,” he stood up, “if you’ll excuse me, I have a brother to call.”

Hermione, Harry, and Ron watched him go, all of them with varying expressions of befuddlement.

“I can’t believe Fred and George did that to you,” Harry said quietly after a long silence.

“I can’t believe Regulus figured it out that quickly,” Ron added.

Hermione sighed, feeling defeated and embarrassed. “Is it that much worse than what I wanted to do to anyone who threatened to tell on us?” *Rat us out*, she corrected in her head. “At least what they did wasn’t permanent.”

“The boils would have been permanent?” Ron yelped, touching his face like he was about to be at the receiving end of that jinx.

Hermione nodded. She didn’t think she’d felt this terrible since first year when she felt isolated, friendless, and distinctly wrong. She threw her head back against the chair in defeat. It felt like every step she took was a misstep, yet every time she couldn’t spot it, like she was so caught up in her desire to be correct, that she couldn’t fathom herself being wrong.

the common goal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was something inside the Room of Requirement. Salazar's hairy fucking bollocks. All that stress, all that research, and there was a Horcrux right around the corner the entire time. In retrospect, it made perfect sense. A hidden room inside Hogwarts, one of the first places that had true meaning to the Dark Lord. He probably thought he was the only one to ever find such a place.

Regulus had been furious upon realizing that the Dark Lord had returned to Hogwarts once after graduating. It felt like vital information, so why hadn't Dumbledore told him earlier? It just felt so frustrating to be without any detail that could lead to the Dark Lord's destruction. He was out in the world, fully restored, doing Merlin knows what, and every minute that went by without Regulus figuring out how to kill him, was another minute that everyone he loved was in danger.

It took a full week to get in contact with Dumbledore, but eventually, he managed it. Actually, he had to send an owl to Lupin to ask him to contact the man since apparently Dumbledore wasn't taking messages from almost anyone else, Regulus included. He was just glad that Lupin was able to respond while he was out on missions for the Order. He was especially grateful that Lupin seemed committed to helping him without bringing up the topic that they almost discussed during the summer.

Regulus barged into Dumbledore's office ready to throw a full tantrum at the man like the fifteen-year-old he pretended to be, but the moment he laid eyes on Dumbledore, the anger seeped out of him like a deflating balloon.

He looked older than the last time he had seen him, stress pulling at him like he was a puppet powerless to the will of the world around him. Regulus could relate to that feeling and it made it more difficult to spit his anger out.

"You should have told me," Regulus said, mostly because he had come for a fight, and he wasn't just going to leave without at least making a point.

"I apologize," Dumbledore replied. "I have been compiling this information for a long time. It was difficult to know what is important." He showed Regulus the wide array of memories he had near his pensieve. "But you are right, it is imperative that you know everything if you are going to fight him."

Regulus gave him a suspicious look. "What were you waiting for exactly?"

"I was hoping I would have something more useful, I suppose," Dumbledore said. "Forgive me. I have grown used to hunting him on my own. There was a time — well, it's not important. I will tell you what I can."

“Have you found any others?”

“I have some theories, but nothing concrete yet.”

Regulus huffed. “Why were you so hard to reach?”

“Professor Umbridge, and Minister Fudge in turn, are very suspicious that I am training students.” Regulus nodded. He had figured that part out for himself. “Especially you and Harry. I was hoping that if I distanced myself from both of you, she would feel less inclined to target you.”

“I think that ship has sailed,” Regulus muttered. “She has it out for Harry especially. I think she thinks he’s an easy target.”

“I see.” Dumbledore frowned slightly, but he didn’t look surprised.

“I won’t allow her to succeed.” He paused, unwilling to reveal too much, but still wanting to make himself clear. “I won’t let her hurt Harry. I will stop her by any means necessary.”

“I do not doubt it, Mr. Black,” Dumbledore said. He looked entertained in a way that made Regulus wonder if the Sorting Hat hadn’t thought of putting the man in Slytherin rather than Gryffindor.

“I need to watch these memories,” Regulus said. He glanced at the various vials stacked behind the pensieve, there were so many of them, all with messy cursive writing on the side. Most of the labels began with a year, the earliest labeled with 1925. “When was he born?”

“December of 1926,” Dumbledore replied. “Some of these are memories of his family members before his birth.”

“His muggle family?”

“Yes, and his wizard family. Are you familiar with the Gaunts?”

Regulus searched through his memories of old families. When he was a child, he and Sirius were forced to memorize the names and family trees of pureblood families. He could still remember being quizzed on all of them at family events, his grandfather Arcturus pulling him and Sirius aside so he could test them. He would laugh when they got the answers right, but shoot a stinging hex at them when they got them wrong.

“They died out, didn’t they?” Regulus asked, finally remembering pieces of the family tree.

“Most of them did,” Dumbledore responded. “The last member of their family to attend Hogwarts was a boy named Ominis Gaunt in the 1880s. He died young, as many members of their family did. Neither Tom Riddle’s mother, Merope, nor his grandfather, Marvolo, attended the school.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“That I’m not sure of. I believe that Merope was as close to a squib as a witch can get while still having magic. It’s unlikely she would have been capable of attending the school. Morfin, Merope’s brother, does appear in the Book of Admittance, but he never accepted.”

“Do you know why?”

“I believe Marvolo wanted to keep his kids separate from our world. You should watch the memories for yourself.”

“Right, yes,” Regulus agreed.

“I believe this is the one you were asking about.” He grabbed one that was labeled ‘1957.’ “Feel free to return, though you must be careful that Umbridge does not spot you.”

Regulus nodded. He had come under Harry’s invisibility cloak this time, already used to sneaking around when he wasn’t going to classes or meals. He was still mulling over some of the memories he’d watched when he met up with his friends for their first official meeting of the Defense group.

He had reached out to Theo Nott a day or two before they figured out the location. At first, he wasn’t sure why he needed to do it, or why it had to be Theo, but after a while, he realized it was because of how isolated he had been in Slytherin in his first life. Sirius had good friends and such a strong supportive group of people around him, but all Regulus had was bad examples around every corner.

When they had the first meeting at the Hog’s Head, he realized how odd it was that students from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff were there, but not a single Slytherin was in the room. It was the same thing that happened during the last war, all the Slytherins sequestered off by themselves in the dungeons to fester. Not that many of them didn’t deserve it, but still, he had the strong desire to be different, to change something.

He thought about inviting Draco first, he had become incredibly helpful in tracking Umbridge’s next plans for the castle — especially the newest form of prefects that she was planning to create made up of exclusively students from *influential families*, which she had mentioned in passing to Draco, anxious to get him on her side — but even with his help, Draco was too far entrenched to be able to join them comfortably. Not to mention that he was so obsessed with getting Harry’s attention that every single meeting would be immediately derailed.

Pansy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all out since he couldn’t invite Draco. He thought about Blaise, but he couldn’t seem to get the boy alone long enough to ask. Millicent was just as difficult to reach. So instead he settled on Theo, mostly because he was pretty sure some of his dormmates were already interested in getting to know the odd loner.

Theo was suspicious at first, as Regulus expected he would be, but it didn’t take much convincing. He was a bit surprised by that honestly given who his father was, another Death Eater just like Lucius Malfoy.

“Do you still talk to your dad?” Theo asked in the middle of Regulus’s prepared argument for why Theo should join.

“Sorry?”

“Sirius Black. Do you still talk to him even though he’s a murderer?”

Ah, Slytherins. He had missed this, the desire to demand sensitive information.

“Yes,” he answered, though he hadn’t talked to Sirius in over a month. He guessed that it still counted.

“It doesn’t bother you that he killed Harry’s parents?”

“He’s my father,” Regulus said, even though it would have bothered him very much. That wasn’t what Theo needed to hear.

Theo nodded once, looking very serious. “I’m bringing Daphne.”

“Fine, but you’ll both have to sign this.” He held out the document that he had charmed blank. Theo’s eyes narrowed.

“What does it do?”

“You know you’re the first person to ask that,” Regulus said with a fond smile. Theo didn’t react. “It keeps you from sharing our secret.”

“Tongue-tying jinx?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Theo said. He had such a dead voice, it must have been his negotiating voice. All Slytherins had one, but most of them just replicated their fathers. That’s why Draco always sounded so ridiculous.

He had expected the rest of his friends to freak out a bit more when Theo and Daphne entered the room with him, but they shocked him by accepting their presence fairly easily. Regulus was pleasantly surprised.

However, he had to admit that he was a bit distracted. The moment he was inside the Room of Requirement, he could hear the ringing. It had been a while since he had heard it, so he didn’t recognize it at first, but after a few uncomfortable seconds, he felt the drain begin. It felt like mold spreading across the inside of his lungs the longer he stood there. It was undeniable. There was a Horcrux in this room. He couldn’t see it, but he knew it was here.

He thought that was going to be the most stressful part of his night until Harry revealed that he was apparently sharing emotions with the Dark Lord himself. It was probably the worst news he could have heard, especially on top of everything else.

It reminded him of something, but he wasn't sure what. It made him think of being a child when he would do something wrong and forget about it, only to be kept up for nights after with the lingering sense of guilt and anxiety that had nowhere to go, no memory to attach to. That's how this new information felt. He could feel something tugging at him, begging him to remember why this was bad. Not just bad but doomsday, worst-thing-that-could-ever-happen bad, but he couldn't reach it.

He needed to talk to Sirius. Not just because Sirius already knew about this, but also because Harry had explicitly asked him to. That imploring look he got on his face when he asked for something was impossible to escape. He knew it and Harry probably knew it too, the little manipulator.

He was momentarily distracted by Hermione's fiasco. Honestly, Fred and George were getting very creative. He didn't tell her that it was partially his fault that she was on the receiving end of their over-the-top punishment. It had started a few weeks prior when Regulus happened upon them testing out some of their new inventions on a couple of first years in one of the more secluded corridors near the Gryffindor Common Room.

"Oh, hey, Reg," Fred said with a wide, unsettling grin. "We're not doing anything."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Sure," he said. "That's what they all say."

George laughed. "Were you looking for us?"

"No, just heading to the library," Regulus responded. "Any progress?"

"Loads," Fred said. "You want to hear about them?" The first years left while he was speaking, all of them looking a little worse for wear, but with a few more coins in their pockets.

"All right."

Regulus dropped his bag on the ground and listened closely as Fred and George listed the many, many products they were trying out. He was honestly impressed by how many they had, though it was clear that several were still in their infancy. Most of them had one specific use: to get a person out of classes for the afternoon. It was a noble cause, though perhaps a bit short-sighted.

"Have you thought about doing something a bit more subtle?" Regulus asked.

Fred furrowed his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

Like the very universe was on his side, Umbridge happened to walk past them at the end of the corridor, giving them a suspicious look before she tottered off. Regulus's eyes stayed glued to where she had disappeared.

"Something that could affect someone over time so that they didn't notice right away," he explained, dragging his eyes away to look at the twins again. "Imagine how crazy you would feel if one of these products released slowly."

They both looked thoughtful, neither replying right away. At the time, Regulus was hoping that they would understand that he meant to use whatever they created on Umbridge. If he could find a way to make her life a little worse then he would. He hadn't expected for Hermione to be their first target.

When Hermione opened up to them, listing off the bizarre occurrences in her life, it all clicked immediately in Regulus's head. He hadn't known that they were rat-related right away, but once they explained where their inspiration came from, it all made sense.

"Listen, I know Hermione can be intense —"

"That's a generous way of putting it," Lee said. He was lying back on his bed, his arms tucked behind his head as he watched Regulus talk to Fred and George who were sitting cross-legged on the floor in the center of the room.

"She means well, she can just be a bit misguided," Regulus said. Hermione had a way of making enemies, a trait that he understood uncomfortably well. Though he never threatened to get others in trouble during his first life — beyond Sirius perhaps when he was very little — he wasn't exactly the nicest kid around. Not to mention that he also had an unusually hard time making friends so he always felt for her.

Fred sighed. He was always the more reasonable of the two, and Regulus could see the way he softened. "Here, let me grab the antidote."

"Fred!" George gasped, placing his palm against his chest in fake offense.

"She did help create the D.A.," Fred said with a shrug. "I'm sure she's suffered long enough." He paused to look over his shoulder from where he was digging around in his trunk. "What symptoms did she experience?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Regulus said, only partially joking. While he couldn't deny that he was impressed by their creation, especially considering how quickly they'd done it, he wasn't about to throw Hermione to the wolves.

Hermione looked so relieved when he gave her the antidote that he was sure the guilt would twist him up for weeks. Poor girl.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a brother to call," he said as he left the common room.

The connection between the Dark Lord and Harry needed to be dealt with as soon as possible, and if he had to talk to Sirius to do it, then he needed to do it right away. There was also the fact that talking to him immediately would reduce Regulus's ability to talk himself out of it.

"Sirius," he said into the mirror after charming his bed curtains shut and silent. There was no reply right away. "Sirius. Sirius!"

"What? What's happening?" Sirius's face appeared in the mirror, his hair disheveled, and his beard too long. He looked scraggly and like he might have been drinking, or like he'd just woken up hungover. "Regulus? Is something wrong? Is it Harry?"

Regulus sighed. “What is wrong with you? I thought you were living in Grimmauld. Why do you look like you’re fresh out of Azkaban?” Sirius scowled.

“Did you call me just to insult my appearance? At least, I don’t look like a fifteen-year-old.”

“No, Sirius, no,” Regulus replied before the words sunk in. “And I can’t help looking fifteen, I didn’t reverse my age on purpose!”

“Sure, that’s what you keep telling us, but what else would cause it? Doubt coming back to life would put you at the perfect age to attend Hogwarts. I’ve surely never read about that happening, have you?”

“For the love of Merlin, it wasn’t my choice! Besides, are you telling me you would have done something different? You’re the one with the maturity of a teenager.”

“I’m plenty mature!” Sirius shouted.

“Right, that’s why you haven’t spoken to me in weeks. The silent treatment — exactly what a fifteen-year-old *you* would do.”

“Well, thirteen-year-old *you* deserved the silent treatment,” Sirius sneered. “Just like you deserve the silent treatment right now!” Sirius’s face disappeared.

Regulus dropped the mirror with a growl, his common sense only coming back to him the moment he wasn’t looking at Sirius’s unhealthy face. He took a few deep breaths. He counted to ten just to make sure he had a grip on himself.

“Sirius, please come back. I really do need to talk to you.”

Sirius appeared a few moments later, but he didn’t say anything.

“Are you not showering? You really look horrible.”

“You know what —” Sirius started offensively.

“No, I’m sorry!” Regulus couldn’t stop himself, could he? “You just look rough. I’m sorry. Are you eating?”

“What are you, my mother?” Sirius snapped immediately.

“Please. Mother never cared if you ate.” The words slipped out before he could stop them, before he could pause to think that they might be a bit cruel. Sirius, however, let out a startled laugh.

“I suppose that’s true,” Sirius said, surprised. He seemed to relax suddenly. “I’m eating. Just hard being here, is all.”

Regulus nodded. He understood. He didn’t love being in Grimmauld anymore either, and Sirius had it far worse than he did. He couldn’t imagine being alone with all those memories.

“I know,” he said. “I’m sorry.” Sirius shrugged. “I need your help.”

“What’s going on?” Sirius said quickly, his eyes bright with the prospect of having a task.

“Harry finally told me about the... emotions he’s getting from You-Know-Who.”

Sirius’s face twisted into horror for a second. “Yes, I told him to mention it to you. Do you know why that’s happening?”

Regulus shook his head. “No, but we need to find a way to stop it.”

“How? If we don’t even know what’s causing it —”

“Yeah, I know.” Regulus let out a defeated sigh. “I could bring it up to Dumbledore next time I see him. Do you think Lupin might have an idea?”

Sirius’s face soured. “I’m not going to ask him.” Regulus huffed.

“Don’t you think this is a little more important —”

“Please, don’t ask me to. You can write him if you want.”

Regulus was quiet for a moment, taking in the pain on his brother’s face. He sighed quietly.

“Okay, I’ll write him.”

Sirius nodded, his shoulders lowering. “Is that it?” He already looked distracted.

“There is something else.” Regulus swallowed, he really did need help with this, and there was no way he would let anyone currently in the castle assist. “I found another Horcrux.”

Sirius fumbled with the mirror for a second, and Regulus was vaguely worried that he might drop it, but he managed to get a grip on it at the last second.

“Where?”

“Hogwarts,” Regulus said. “Have you ever heard of the Room of Requirement?”

Sirius looked thoughtful for a second. “I don’t think so?” That was a surprise.

“It’s a secret room in the school that changes based on what someone needs. Dobby, the elf that used to belong to the Malfoys, told Harry about it. I think You-Know-Who must have found it during his time at Hogwarts and hid something there when he came back to interview for the Defense Against the Dark Arts a few years after he graduated.”

“I’m sorry.” Sirius shook his head, confused. “He tried to be a professor?”

Regulus chuckled. “Yeah, I don’t know if he was genuine in that though. Dumbledore thinks he put a curse on the position, that’s why no professor has lasted more than a year.” Sirius’s mouth dropped open.

“You’re kidding,” he said with a little laugh. Regulus shook his head, smiling.

“Nope. I saw the memory myself. Anyways,” he sobered, “I need help getting the Horcrux out. I can’t approach it on my own given what happened last time.” Sirius nodded, a frown on his lips now. “I was thinking you could come here during Christmas. Umbridge probably won’t stay, and I don’t want you to risk coming until she’s gone.”

“You’re not coming home for Christmas?” Sirius looked so crestfallen that Regulus almost laughed, though it wouldn’t have been a very nice laugh. His stomach warped as he remembered the many lonely Christmases during his first life when Sirius refused to come home and visit. He would have given anything at the time for Sirius to care this much.

“I will,” he replied. Harry wouldn’t be happy if he stayed in the castle so there was no way he could get away with that. “But I figure the two of us could come back.”

Sirius nodded. “Yes, let’s do it.” He smiled suddenly. “I can’t believe you found another one.” He looked triumphant, and Regulus felt all the hurt feelings, all the hard memories from his first life and the last few weeks dissipating.

All they needed was a common goal.

Chapter End Notes

regulus: if umbridge fucks with me, i'm gonna kill her
dumbledore: i'm not a cop

the crow.

It was the second day of November, the day of Gryffindor's first Quidditch match of the year, the match against Slytherin, and Harry, along with Fred and George, had just been given a lifetime ban from Quidditch by Umbridge.

It was a mess of a day from the very start, Ron was extremely worried about his ability to play, his practices growing worse and worse as the days counted down to their first match. He would always start off strong, but the first time the Quaffle got past him, he would grow insecure and his playing would grow more unsteady.

The Slytherins were capitalizing on this heavily, mocking him whenever they had the chance and even creating chants and a particularly annoying song just to irritate him. “ *Weasley is our King* ,” they would say. Regulus had been sure they would lose the game, though, of course, Harry managed to catch the Snitch before the Slytherins could get too many goals past Ron.

Draco was beyond annoyed by this, jumping right into mocking both Harry and Ron the moment his feet hit the ground. Harry and George tackled him to the ground once Draco resigned himself to insulting Ron's parents. Regulus couldn't do much other than roll his eyes in exasperation, too far from them to stop the fight from ensuing.

“Banned? For life?” he asked Harry the moment he left McGonagall's office. Regulus had seen Umbridge waddle into the office only a handful of minutes after Harry, Fred, and George entered. Regulus, along with Hermione, were standing right outside waiting for them.

Harry nodded miserably. Angelina, the Gryffindor team captain, sounded just as distraught when they talked to her later that evening in the common room.

“Banned. No Seeker and no Beaters... what on earth are we going to do?” she said in a hollow voice. Her eyes seemed to glaze over for a moment. Regulus watched them interact, a feeling of dread inside him. Not that he really cared about the Gryffindor Quidditch team's chances at the Quidditch Cup, but more because this meant Harry would have more free time to ruminate, and Regulus had discovered long ago that too much free time was a very bad thing for Potters.

“Where is Ron?” Harry asked once Angelina went up to bed.

“I think he's avoiding us,” Hermione said worriedly. Just as she finished speaking, the portrait swung open and Ron came through, snow still melting in his hair. “Where have you been?”

“Walking,” Ron muttered. He immediately started apologizing for being bad at Quidditch, which was just depressing if you asked Regulus, and then announced that tomorrow he was going to resign from the team. Harry was able to convince him not to — mostly by

explaining that if he did, Angelina would be without four players rather than three — but Ron didn't appear to feel much better.

"This is the worst I've ever felt in my life," Ron said miserably.

"Join the club," Harry replied.

"Well, I can think of one thing that might cheer you both up," Hermione said. She was standing by the window as she spoke, she'd been up and down all evening, pacing around the common room. Regulus looked at her questioningly.

"Oh yeah?" Harry asked distractedly.

"Yep. Hagrid's back," she said. Regulus went upstairs with Harry so that he could grab his invisibility cloak. He was just planning to tell him to be careful when his *Lumos Ostentum* spell went off.

It was a complicated piece of magic, something he designed himself after exhaustive research on weather-predicting spells. He knew that they needed a lightning storm to do what they needed to do, but he didn't want it to sneak up on them. He wanted to be prepared, hence *Lumos Ostentum*, a spell used specifically to predict lightning within a few hours of it occurring.

"Harry," he said as he followed him into the room. "Once you're done speaking to Hagrid, meet me by the Whomping Willow."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"It's tonight." Regulus grinned widely as he said it. He had just been worried about Harry and his free time, it was like magic herself was trying to help him out. Harry's eyes lit up.

"Seriously?" he said, the earlier grimness chased away by excitement.

"Seriously." Regulus watched him go.

He needed to prepare everything, that was the main reason he was staying behind, though he didn't want to admit that he wasn't as keen on visiting Hagrid as Harry, Ron, and Hermione were. He liked the man well enough, but Regulus always felt uncomfortable in his presence. When he was honest with himself, he could admit it was because he knew how awful he had been about Hagrid's presence during his first life.

Regulus didn't really know him then, he certainly never took Care of Magical Creatures, and he never even spoke to the man, but there were rumors, and Regulus still believed what his family wanted him to. He felt guilty about it now, not even sure when his opinions had changed, but he knew Hagrid was a kind man, and he felt bad for being so judgmental, even if it was just in his own head.

He cast a disillusionment charm on himself as he left the common room. He was glad that the dangerous Greek magic had healed him enough to cast such a spell and for it to hold. He could only hope that it would be strong enough for what he needed tonight. It wasn't curfew

yet, but he still didn't want Umbridge to see him if he could help it. He was glad that Harry had left behind the map as it made it far easier to move through the castle while avoiding everyone else.

He made it to the boathouse half an hour later, he had to sit down once or twice to let his legs rest and wait for the pain to subside. He made quick work of packing up the vials, glad that he had managed to add the final two ingredients just a week earlier: the chrysalis of a Death's-head Hawk Moth and a silver teaspoon of dew from a place that neither sunlight nor human feet had touched for a full seven days.

The Mandrake leaves that Harry and Regulus had kept in their mouths for an entire month were already in there, as well as one of their hairs. It was an interesting mixture. He recovered the boat with his other potion, a complex pain potion used specifically to treat nerve damage. He was supposed to get a professional to brew it for him, but that would require regular visits to St. Mungo's and Regulus just couldn't be bothered.

He walked to Whomping Willow slowly, his feet dragging in the snow. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen lightning in the snow, but the spell he created didn't lie. He had tested it a few times in early September so he knew it worked. He cast a warming charm on himself and settled in to wait for Harry.

Here was the thing, Regulus knew this was insane. Sure, Sirius and James had become animagi when they were around this age, but Regulus was very much not them. He was not this reckless usually. Especially when it came to Harry's safety. But Harry had been restless over the summer, and Regulus kept having nightmares about Harry trapped in that muggle graveyard with the Dark Lord. He kept thinking, "Well, if he just had a way to run, if he had another way to hide, if he could get away without using a wand..."

It was exhausting honestly, but he thought of Sirius escaping from prison and hiding near Hogwarts for a year even as dementors swarmed the area. If Harry was in danger, having an animagus form was the perfect way for him to escape. Not to mention that he knew Harry needed something to focus on. So many times Regulus had watched Harry walk right into danger. He just wanted to give him something to focus on.

It had worked so far. Harry was clearly bothered by Umbridge and the other students, his irritation growing every day, but Regulus kept giving him new pieces of research about becoming an animagus that he had to study. Harry would absorb the information and then prattle on about it to Regulus whenever they were alone. It was enough of a distraction that Regulus could practically see the tension leaving him when he had something else to focus on.

They had started in secret shortly before school began — Regulus gave Harry the original textbook on the subject for his birthday — and had been working towards this night ever since. It was perfect that it would arrive the same night that Harry had suffered such a blow.

However, Regulus was also extremely worried about tonight, the excitement battling for dominance in a war against his anxiety. Becoming an animagus was extremely dangerous, especially for underage wizards who had no formal training in the process. The first transformation came with a whole host of dangers, including one specific one that kept

Regulus up at night. It was possible that, if not done correctly, the spell could cause the wizard casting it to partially transform, leading to a half-human, half-animal mutation that had no known cure. To say he was worried about it would be an understatement given that he'd had about forty-five nightmares about waking up with a tail.

He was distracted by his thoughts when he heard footsteps approaching through the snow. He wasn't sure how long he'd been out there, not long he didn't think, but apparently long enough for Harry to show up. He watched the shimmer of the invisibility cloak as it was pulled up and raised an eyebrow when it wasn't just Harry, but Hermione and Ron as well.

"Harry?" Regulus asked uncertainly.

"So here's the thing —" Harry started to say, a supremely guilty look on his face.

"Let's talk inside," Hermione said sharply. "*Wingardium Leviosa* ." She lifted a thick branch off the ground and used it to touch the knot on the tree that would stop it from swinging around.

"Wait," Regulus said, but the three of them were already moving, shuffling into the secret passage under the tree. Regulus had no choice but to follow them. It didn't take long to get to the shack, though it felt long given the tense silence between the four of them.

"Ron, you'd better explain," Hermione said the moment the trap door was shut behind them. She turned slightly to light a fire in the fireplace. Regulus hadn't even realized that this building had a fireplace.

Ron, unlike Harry, did not look guilty, and unlike Hermione, he did not look annoyed. Instead, Ron looked invigorated.

"I knew you guys were up to something!" he shouted. Harry cringed slightly, but Regulus just furrowed his eyebrows and crossed his arms tightly.

"What do you mean?" Regulus asked blankly.

"I knew something was going on, and then Hermione suggested I use my abilities to figure out what you were hiding."

Hermione rolled her eyes instantly. "He didn't use his abilities, he just looked through your stuff."

"No, I specifically thought '*help me find what they're hiding...*' Then I looked through your stuff and found this." Ron pulled out a book from his cloak, one of the thin diaries that Regulus had given to Harry. It was from the perspective of a South American animagus, a half-fictional account of her using her abilities to hunt down poachers.

"It's just a book," Regulus replied, unwilling to give in.

"Harry already confirmed it," Hermione said.

"Harry!" Regulus shouted. Harry cringed again.

“I’m sorry! I’m not a good liar,” he muttered. Regulus gave a put-upon sigh, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“We want in,” Ron said. “There is no way I’m going to let you become animagus-es without me.”

“It’s animagi, Ron,” Hermione said, before squaring her shoulders. “But I agree. This is a very advanced piece of magic. I want to participate.”

“You can’t,” Regulus said. Both Hermione and Ron opened their mouths to argue, so he hurried on. “We’ve been preparing for this for weeks. You guys don’t have the supplies or anything.”

“Well, not tonight, but we can start working on it. Both of you can help us,” Hermione said. She was speaking sternly, in what Regulus had come to recognize as her prefect-voice, but even he could see the spark of excitement in her eyes.

“Fine,” he said. “But you cannot tell anyone. I am swearing you both to secrecy before you go to bed tonight.”

“They won’t tell anyone,” Harry said.

“Right, just like Peter Pettigrew wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“We’ll agree to an oath of secrecy,” Hermione said.

“Okay,” Regulus said, relaxing slightly. “We’re doing this tonight, so both of you should leave.”

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Because it can be dangerous to be around a freshly transformed animagus. If one of us gets upset or panics at all, the animal mind can gain ascendancy, and we can do something dangerous without realizing it.”

“What if we just stand up here?” Hermione asked, already walking up the stairs. “Then we can run and lock the door if something goes wrong.”

“It would be better if you just left,” Regulus said sternly. Hermione crossed her arms.

“I don’t think we should leave, what if something goes wrong and you two need help?”

“We’re going to do it one at a time,” Regulus answered. Ron looked between them before crossing his arms as well.

“We’re staying,” he said. Harry let out a muffled laugh.

“I am going to hex both of you,” Regulus said in a low voice.

“Come on, what’s the harm?” Harry asked, looking pouty in a way that made Regulus want to burst out laughing.

“You know you can lose your clothes if you don’t do this correctly. Do you really want Ron and Hermione to see you naked?” Regulus asked, making a last-ditch effort to persuade him.

“No, but if I know you at all, which I like to think that I do, you already hid clothes here for us to change into if that happens. They can just look away when I transform back.”

Regulus growled in frustration. “You are all making this so difficult for no reason,” Regulus said.

“Just give in, Reg,” Ron said.

“The storm has started,” Hermione said, looking between the slats of the boarded-up window behind them. Regulus sighed defeatedly.

“All right, Harry, you better go first,” he said. “You remember the spell?”

“Of course, I’ve only had to say it twice a day for weeks on end,” Harry muttered, though it was ruined by the smile on his face. Harry settled down on the floor, placing his wand against his heart. He removed his glasses and handed them to Regulus who pocketed them. He took off his cloak, as well as his shoes and socks, leaving on a pair of trousers and one of his cheaper shirts, exactly what Regulus told him to wear.

Regulus looked up at Ron and Hermione who were watching with rapt attention. He cast one quick protective spell over them, just in case.

“Amato Animo Animato Animagus,” Harry said, his eyes squeezed closed. He let out a gasp of pain, dropping his wand, bending forward slightly, holding the palms of his hands against his eyes. Regulus rushed forward and grabbed the wand — more than one of the books he’d read insisted that getting your wand out of the way was the best way to go. He was pretty sure half the animagi he’d read about had destroyed their wands on accident while in their animal forms.

“How do you feel?” Regulus asked as the seconds ticked by.

Harry didn’t reply, but Regulus heard a very soft, “Oh,” come out of his mouth, and then he was shifting. He shrunk first, his body growing smaller like it was being mashed into a tiny ball. His black hair spread across his face and down the rest of his body. His arms folded in before stretching out. It was bizarre to witness, and Regulus could tell that his brain was rejecting whatever he was seeing, but finally, Harry seemed to settle, and Regulus could finally take him in.

“He’s a raven!” Ron shouted.

“That’s not a raven, it’s a crow,” Hermione corrected, though she sounded just as elated.

“How do you even know that?” Ron asked.

“Everyone knows that,” Hermione snapped.

“Can you two be quiet, please?” Regulus said. Both of them snapped their mouths shut. He was watching crow-Harry as he looked around the room. “Harry, can you hear me?”

The crow tilted his head to the side, his beady eyes staring through Regulus before he let out a loud caw. Harry spread out his wings, flapping them repeatedly while jumping up and down in place. He cawed again. Then again. Regulus hoped that was an excited noise, and not one of distress, though it was hard to tell.

“Of course, you’re a bird,” Regulus said quietly, more to himself than anything.

Harry cawed twice and then started flapping his wings in earnest. He jumped forward a few steps before he was finally able to catch some air. Flying must have been difficult though, because he couldn’t manage to get more than a few feet off the ground. Regulus wondered if it was taxing for his new bird body.

“This is so cool,” Ron breathed. “Imagine what Harry could do with this form.”

“It’s perfect,” Regulus said. “If anyone tried to trap you, you could just fly away.” He hadn’t meant to say those words out loud, but now they were out and he felt embarrassment begin to fester inside him.

He looked up at Ron and Hermione again. Ron just looked exhilarated, but Hermione was looking at him softly like she understood perfectly well what he wanted for Harry, that he just wanted to give him every chance to survive.

“Okay, Harry,” he said, refocusing on the task at hand. “In order to turn back, you have to picture your human form. Can you do that?” He looked up one more time. “You two better go in the other room... just in case.”

Ron snickered, but Hermione grabbed his arm and pulled him down the hallway. Regulus listened to the sound of the door closing.

“Harry, can you hear me?” Harry cawed in reply and Regulus nodded, kneeling down to look him in the eye. It was so bizarre to speak to a crow like this, but it was undeniably Harry. The large lightning scar on his forehead came through on his animagus form, showing up as gray down the front of his face.

It took about twenty minutes for Harry to change back, Regulus talking him through it the entire time, trying to make sure that he didn’t get lost in his head or panic. He was glad that he sent Ron and Hermione away because Harry was completely naked when he transformed back, his clothes vanishing in the transformation.

Regulus summoned the set of clothing he’d hidden in the shack, turning his back so that Harry could redress privately.

“Okay, you guys can come out!” Harry shouted up the stairs once he was dressed. Regulus turned around to see Harry’s face lit up with so much emotion that he strangely felt like

crying.

“Well?” Regulus asked, a smile tugging at his lips against his will.

“That was the most incredible thing I have ever experienced!” Harry yelled loudly. “I’m a bird! I can fly! I mean, I can’t really fly yet. It’s so tiring, I’m going to have to practice, but I can fly! Eventually!” Regulus laughed, as did Ron. “I could see it in my head right before I transformed, I could see the crow in my head. That was so cool!”

“Do you think your patronus changed?” Hermione asked. Ron looked flabbergasted. “What? I’ve read that they’re often the same.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Mine has always been my dad’s animagus form.”

“Try it,” Ron suggested.

Harry focused for a moment, taking his wand from Regulus. “*Expecto Patronum*,” he said, blue light spilling out of his wand instantly. It was immediately clear that it had changed, his patronus was much smaller than it used to be. It flitted around the room swiftly before coming to rest on Harry’s shoulder. He looked happy to see it, but also a little torn.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus said. Harry looked at him curiously. “I know you liked having James’s patronus.” Harry frowned slightly, but his face cleared quickly.

“Yeah, I did,” he said. His patronus disappeared a moment later. “Okay, your turn.”

Regulus sighed, his heart rate suddenly galloping in his chest. He hadn’t been nervous before, not for himself, but now that Harry had successfully done it and it was time, he felt anxiety pool in his chest.

“Okay,” Regulus said, trying to swallow down his nervousness. “Once you take my wand, go upstairs with Ron and Hermione. Just in case.”

“It’s all right,” Harry said easily. “I know you won’t hurt me.”

“No, you don’t know that,” Regulus said, even as he softened. “Just please, please go upstairs.”

“Fine,” Harry said, with a nod.

Regulus toed off his shoes slowly, pulling off his socks and tucking them into his shoes neatly. He pulled off his cloak and threw it over the back of the dusty couch before sitting down on the ground. His hand shook slightly as he touched it to his chest, right above his heart. He had been saying this spell for weeks, every morning and night. He had even begun hearing a second heartbeat two weeks ago. He could do this, he was ready.

“Amato Animo Animato Animagus.”

Regulus had imagined being an animagus many times, when he was a child he would pretend to be different animals, playing with Sirius as they crawled around Sirius’s room. Since he’d

learned that James and Sirius were animagi, he'd thought about what it would have been like to have turned with them, to run around the forest on the full moons while they were all at Hogwarts. Even recently he had imagined what it would feel like to change whenever he wanted to, to become something other than himself, to escape into another form.

In all his musings, he hadn't ever fully settled on an animal. There was a part of him — a much bigger part than he'd originally realized — that thought he might be a cat. He'd always liked cats and when he was a child, a cat was always his favorite animal to pretend to be. He would picture himself as a black cat with gray eyes. It would be the perfect counterpart to Sirius, a large black dog.

He wasn't a cat. Okay, he could accept that, though he didn't know what he would turn into beyond that. Maybe a snake, that would have been neat.

But this? No, he would have never guessed this. Not in a million years.

the vision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sirius was staring at the wall in a very dark room when he heard the voice of his great-great-grandfather.

He did that a lot these days, sat in the dark, and stared at the wall. There wasn't much else to do in Grimmauld Place other than spiral. He thought that he used to like spiraling. Of course, he didn't like it at the time, the act of spiraling could be terrible, but there was a certain comfort to it. There was safety in that chaos.

He didn't like spiraling so much anymore, probably because the things he was spiraling over were happening right in front of him instead of a year, two years, five years, ten years in the past. Mostly he spiraled about Remus and that, as it had always been, was the worst kind of spiraling imaginable. It was gut-wrenching like someone had taken a hot poker and jammed it so far down his throat that he was getting indigestion.

Remus wasn't around much anymore. He hadn't really been around for years, when Sirius really thought about it, but now he hadn't been around since the summer. He was on missions for the Order, just like last time, except now Sirius didn't know when he was coming back. Sometimes he would return to Grimmauld, but he suspected that he might be going elsewhere. He might be seeking someone else out, warming someone else's bed. His chest ached.

See? Spiraling wasn't so fun anymore. No more of the torturous "it's my fault, all my fault, James and Lily died because of me." At least in that madness, there was a center, a leading point. He could blame himself. With Remus now, it just felt like a betrayal, it felt like the man he loved looking him in the eyes and telling him that he wasn't good enough.

Not that he'd ever been good enough for Remus. Remus was far too good for everyone, but Sirius used to hope to earn that place next to him. Now he knew he couldn't, and Remus knew it too. Why else was he moving on with someone younger, someone better? He knew he deserved more than Sirius.

He stared harder at the blank wall as if staring harder was even something he could do. Well, he tried. The blank wall couldn't hurt him. It couldn't remind him of all the times he'd been hurt in this forsaken house. It couldn't tell him that he wasn't good enough, that he was an ulcer on the people he loved.

"SIRIUS!"

Oh, right, his great-great-grandfather was calling to him. Phineas, the old headmaster of Hogwarts. He had a painting somewhere in the house, one of the guest rooms. He wished Dumbledore had let him destroy it.

“It will allow me to communicate from my office at Hogwarts with you or anyone at Grimmauld Place,” Dumbledore had said.

“You couldn’t just send a patronus?” Sirius asked petulantly.

“Patronuses cannot get through the wards of this house.”

“SIRIUS, ARE YOU STILL ALIVE?”

That yelling was really interrupting his staring time. He sighed, dragging his eyes away from the blank wall. He didn’t stand though. Maybe Phineas would shut up, and he could get lost for a little while longer. Harry and Regulus would be home for Christmas in a few days. He had already begun decorating and even sent Molly out with a few Galleons to purchase gifts for them.

Molly and he hadn’t gotten along at first, things were tense for most of the summer, but she and Arthur moved back into their home once their kids left for school. Seeing her once a week when she came to drop off baked goods and get updates about the Order made their relationship much more harmonious.

“SIRIUS BLACK!”

“What is it?” Sirius said, finally standing and walking quickly to the guest room where Phineas’s portrait hung. He was red in the face, a common trait for Black family members.

“Arthur Weasley has been injured. His wife, children, and Harry Potter are coming to stay.”

“Right now?” Sirius yelled.

“I was trying to call you!”

“I was otherwise engaged,” Sirius muttered.

“What should I tell them?”

“What should you tell them?” Sirius shouted. “Tell them I’ll be delighted.” He spoke sarcastically, the exact kind of voice that would have gotten him punished by his father, but Phineas only nodded and walked out of frame. “Wait, what about Regulus?”

Phineas did not return. Kreacher appeared next to them.

“Phineas Black was calling for Master Sirius,” Kreacher said.

“Yes, thanks for that Kreacher,” Sirius replied, shoving past the elf so that he could change clothes. He couldn’t remember the last time he bathed. Regulus wouldn’t be happy if he saw him like this.

“Mundungus Fletcher is in the kitchen. He is trying to steal —”

“Just get rid of him. Don’t let him steal anything. Regulus won’t be happy!” Sirius called.

He barely made it halfway down the hallway when he felt them come through the wards.

“Back again, the blood traitor brats —”

“Go Kreacher!” Sirius shouted.

He hurried down to where they had arrived. They were all standing in a large group so Sirius couldn’t make out who all was with them. So many redheads in one place, it was hard to see past. Finally, they disentangled enough for him to make out Harry and Regulus standing next to each other.

“What’s going on?” he said. The youngest Weasley girl, Ginerva, had fallen to the ground as they landed so he reached a hand down to help her up.

“Ask Harry,” one of the twins said.

“Yeah, I want to hear this for myself,” the other twin added.

“No,” Regulus said instantly. “We’re going to go into the kitchen to make tea first.”

“This is our father we’re asking about!” one of the twins shouted.

“You hearing about it isn’t going to help him right this moment. Into the kitchen, now,” Regulus said sternly. He had a look on his face that even Sirius found a bit intimidating, though he would never admit that out loud. “Is Mrs. Weasley here?”

“Not yet,” Sirius responded when he realized Regulus was speaking to him. “There are butterbeers.” He offered it more for something to do than anything. He grabbed bottles for each of the Weasleys and one for Harry. All of them looked a bit shell-shocked, though the twins were glaring at Regulus.

“Now, Harry, what happened?” Regulus said, sitting down a few minutes later. Harry had been staring blankly at the table, something like guilt on his face.

“I had a — a kind of — vision...” he stumbled over his words like he didn’t want to say them. Sirius sat down next to him and put his arm around the back of Harry’s chair. Harry didn’t even acknowledge him. He must have been really shaken. He proceeded to explain the vision he’d had where he had to watch Arthur be attacked by a giant snake, Voldemort’s snake. Sirius knew he was on a mission for the Order, though he wasn’t sure exactly what he was doing. Dumbledore was holding everything close to the chest these days.

“We have to call Mum,” one of the twins said. Sirius thought it was Fred but he hadn’t slept in a few days so he couldn’t be sure.

“Dumbledore is probably letting Molly know now. The important thing was to get you away before Umbridge could interfere,” Sirius responded.

“We’ve got to go to St. Mungo’s,” Ginerva said urgently.

“No one is going anywhere,” Regulus said, his voice brokering no argument.

“How can you say that?” George growled.

“Because the only reason we know this is because Harry saw it in a vision,” Regulus said. Harry flinched slightly, Sirius lowered his arm so that he could squeeze Harry’s shoulder comfortingly. “If we show up there, then the wrong people might get word that we know something we shouldn’t. You cannot help by showing up there.”

Fred and George looked like they were going to start arguing again, but Regulus kept talking.

“I know it sucks! I know! But we can’t do anything yet. Wait at least until your mum arrives, then she’ll tell us what to do,” Regulus said. Sirius could hear the first strain of stress on his voice, but he didn’t think the Weasleys noticed. Harry looked like he was so far deep in his own head that he couldn’t hear anything being said.

They settled into silence. One of Harry’s hands was shaking just slightly, and Sirius wished he could pull him out of the room to comfort him, but he didn’t feel like he could move yet. After a handful of minutes, a burst of fire erupted midair, and a scroll of parchment fell heavily to the table with a loud thunk.

“Fawkes!” Sirius shouted when he noticed the single golden phoenix tail feather next to the scroll. Regulus grabbed it so fast that his hand was a blur. He wasn’t moving that quickly when he left in September, Sirius didn’t even realize he could feel relief over that.

“Dad is still alive. I am setting out for St. Mungo’s now. Stay where you are. I will send news as soon as I can. Mum,” Regulus read aloud.

“Still alive...” George said, or at least, he thought it was George. “But that makes it sound...”

No one moved for a long time. Regulus was standing near the end of the table, but eventually, he even settled into a chair to wait. Sirius sunk into his thoughts for a while, though they didn’t spiral like he expected them to. Even having someone near him was enough to chase away the bad thoughts for the time being. Harry wasn’t so lucky. His hand kept trembling when he tried to take sips from the butterbeer in front of him.

It was nearly five a.m. when Molly came barreling into the kitchen. Her hair was a mess and her face was pale. He couldn’t even imagine how she was feeling.

“He’s going to be all right,” she said, her voice wobbling. Sirius didn’t even hear what else she said, only leaned back in his chair slightly as his body relaxed. Harry seemed to collapse in on himself slightly.

“Let’s go to bed,” Sirius said quietly to him. Harry looked torn, but Regulus responded.

“Come on,” Regulus said, all but dragging Harry out of the kitchen to give the Weasleys space to be together. Sirius followed close behind them. Harry was shivering by the time they reached Sirius’s old bedroom, the one Harry had lived in over the summer. Regulus looked like he was half-carrying him by the time they entered the room.

“What’s happening?” Sirius asked. Regulus was on the warpath, and he could understand that Harry was upset, but he couldn’t comprehend whatever stress was itching under his skin.

Harry sat down on the bed immediately, staring down at his hands. “Tell me what you saw,” Regulus said. Harry glanced up for a split second before dropping his vision. “It’s okay, you know neither of us would judge you.”

Harry tucked his lips between his teeth, his face scrunching up in the way James's would when he was about to cry. Sirius sat on the bed next to him and put his arm around his shoulders.

“Harry, what’s wrong?” Sirius asked. Regulus was standing over them, tension running through his body like he might vibrate out of reality in a split second.

“I didn’t just see it happening,” Harry said, his voice losing its steadiness by the second. “I was the snake. I was attacking him. I almost killed Mr. Weasley.” Regulus’s teeth were clenched together tight enough to crack them down the middle.

“Did you tell this to Dumbledore?” Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. “He didn’t tell me what it meant. He doesn’t tell me anything anymore…”

“He’s worried that talking to you will draw Umbridge’s attention,” Regulus said instantly. “He’s not ignoring you on purpose.”

“Well, it’s not working, she’s still after me!” Harry snapped. Sirius didn’t think he’d ever witnessed Harry snap at Regulus. Regulus didn’t so much as blink.

“You’re not responsible for what happened to Mr. Weasley,” Regulus said instantly, his voice firm. “You are not the Dark Lord or his snake. You are the only reason he is alive right now. You did not do anything to the man.”

“How do you know that?” Harry said, he sounded angry, but there was anguish there too.

“Because I know you. And I was sleeping in the bed next to you while it happened. You did not do anything wrong.”

Harry looked like he might start crying again. “You need sleep,” Sirius said quietly. “Let’s get some food in you, and then you can come up here and get some sleep. I promise you’ll feel better after some rest.”

Regulus nodded in agreement. “Kreacher,” he called. Kreacher popped into existence. “Will you make breakfast for everyone?”

“The blood traitors are already making breakfast,” Kreacher said nastily. Sirius had to keep himself from sneering at the elf.

Regulus rubbed his eyes. “Okay, thank you, Kreacher.”

“Why are you so nice to him?” Sirius said, his irritation rising.

“Because he doesn’t know any better,” Regulus responded. “Harry, do you want to eat up here or do you want to go back downstairs?”

Harry was quiet for a long moment before responding, staring at his hands again. “Can I eat up here?”

“Of course,” Sirius responded. Regulus just nodded. “I’ll go grab you a plate, okay?”

“Thanks,” Harry mumbled. Sirius left the room a second later, but he wasn’t expecting Regulus to follow him.

“When was the last time you slept?” Regulus said as they walked back downstairs. Sirius groaned quietly.

“Please don’t start,” Sirius muttered.

Regulus ground his teeth together. He had dark circles under his eyes after the night of no sleep. “You smell terrible,” Regulus said. “Can you just go sit with Harry? I’ll bring you both food.”

“I don’t need —”

“Please, please, do not argue with me right now,” Regulus snapped.

“Okay, Reggie,” Sirius said quietly. He watched Regulus walk away and cast a quick cleaning charm on himself — he really did need to shower — before walking back to where Harry was sitting unmoving on his bed.

“I thought you were grabbing me food?” Harry said, a quiet smile on his face. Sirius was relieved to see it.

“Regulus put me in time-out,” Sirius said with a smirk. Harry chuckled.

“He does that,” he replied. Sirius sat back next to him again, knocking his shoulder with Harry’s.

“I’m sorry you had that vision, but you should feel good about yourself. Arthur could have been in serious danger had you not told anyone. I know that couldn’t have been easy,” Sirius said softly. He felt like Harry had been his only persistent point for the past few months. He didn’t know where he would be if he didn’t have this relationship, especially with the consistent mirror calls.

“It didn’t feel very good,” Harry responded quietly. “I’m afraid they’re going to blame me.”

“I understand,” Sirius said. “It’s easier to worry that you’re going to get blamed than recognize you did something good.” He’d had a long childhood of being blamed, Harry had a similar experience, as much as it hurt to admit that to himself, so he knew that Harry was the same to him in that way.

“Yeah,” Harry said before leaning heavily into Sirius’s side. Sirius held him with both arms now, sitting quietly as they waited for Regulus to return with plates of food for both of them. Kreacher appeared a second after Regulus entered the room to set down tea for each of them. “Thanks.”

“Thank you, Reggie,” Sirius said politely. Regulus just nodded, sitting down at the desk in the corner of the room right as Kreacher reappeared with another plate of food. He accepted it with a small, polite smile. The three of them ate in silence, and then Harry and Regulus retired to get some sleep.

Later Harry, along with all the Weasleys, left to go visit Arthur in the hospital with Moody and Tonks going with them. Tonks, as always, was very friendly with Sirius. He wished she would just be mean to him, it would be so much easier. She was extremely interested in Harry’s vision, but Harry bore it all with a smile as if he didn’t look like a dead man walking to the gallows.

“You’re not going with them?” Sirius asked Regulus once they were gone. Regulus shook his head.

“I’m not part of that family,” Regulus replied. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“Harry is really shaken up,” Sirius said quietly.

“Something is happening to him.” The floodgates seemed to have opened, and now that they were alone, Regulus didn’t seem able to close them. “I have no idea what it is though. I think it’s connected to him getting You-Know-Who’s emotions, but I don’t understand how. And why the snake? It doesn’t make sense.”

Sirius didn’t notice the slip-up earlier, but he noticed it now hearing Regulus called Voldemort You-Know-Who. He wondered if he still called him the Dark Lord in his head.

“I don’t know either. I think we should talk to Dumbledore.”

“I agree,” Regulus said, but his face grew pale as he said it.

“What?”

Regulus was quiet, fiddling with his wand, refusing to lift his head. “I’m afraid to find out the answer.”

Sirius nodded instantly. He understood that completely. It felt like every new piece of information was another stab through his skin. It felt like bad things kept happening.

“Were you alone here?” Regulus asked, shaking off his melancholy and worry like it was nothing more than a blanket he had draped over his shoulders to escape the cold.

“Yeah, I have been for a while,” Sirius said. “Molly comes about once a week, but she never stays long.”

“And Lupin?” Regulus asked though he looked a little regretful. Sirius worked not to flinch.

“It’s been a couple of weeks since we last spoke. He doesn’t come here that often. Busy with... whatever he’s busy with.”

“I don’t think you should stay here anymore,” Regulus said.

“What?” Sirius yelped. “This is my house, you know!”

“I’m not kicking you out,” Regulus said, rolling his eyes exasperatedly. “This house is killing you, Sirius. I think after Christmas you need to find somewhere else that’s not going to do this to you. I don’t like coming back to find you looking like this.”

“I don’t look that bad,” Sirius said, staring down at himself uncertainly.

“Maybe not to anyone else, but I don’t want to see it. You’re no good to anyone if you’re suffering like this.”

“Where would I go instead? The cave near Hogwarts?” He had meant to make the words sarcastic, but they came out sincere. It wasn’t the worst place he’d lived.

“Don’t be stupid,” Regulus said. “Maybe we could buy a new house somewhere. There are other Black properties already, though I don’t know how much you would like those. I’m not sure. I had hoped,” he spat the word like it had betrayed him, “that Lupin would be here to take care of you.”

“He’s on a mission for the Order,” Sirius said.

“I don’t care about the Order.” There was an unstable sincerity in his words, the kind that made Sirius want to run and hide under the bed, cowering as Padfoot. “I care that you survive.”

“Aww Reggie,” Sirius said, mostly because he was a dick, but also because this kind of sincerity was a bit too much for his sleep-deprived self to handle.

“Forget it!” Regulus shouted, retreating instantly. “Die. See if I care.” He stomped off into the house. Sirius felt regret fester inside him, though relief was there too.

He thought he understood Regulus though, at least, he understood his point of view. Sirius cared about the Order, only in so much that it allowed him to protect Harry. He wasn’t in it for some noble reason like he was in his late teens and early twenties. He wanted Harry to survive, he wanted Regulus to survive. He wanted them happy and safe. That was the thing with the Order though, so many of them were only in it because they had people to fight for. It wasn’t a cause, it wasn’t part of the government, it was just a group of people who loved someone in their life so much that they would literally fight the most dangerous wizard alive just to keep them alive.

It was daunting sometimes to think of how ragtag their group was, built together with so little. Sirius felt like that sometimes too. Like all he had left was the love he felt for Regulus, for Harry, for Remus. That was the only human bit of him that still existed. The rest of him was just empty rooms.

He couldn't leave Grimmauld, even though Regulus was right and it was probably killing him. He had to be close to the Order, for one. But he also couldn't leave a place so representative of who he was. Empty, dead rooms, held together with a terrible rotting frame. Without Grimmauld, Sirius would be too untethered. He would slip off the face of the Earth. There was already so little tying him here.

Chapter End Notes

sorry, no reveal yet on reggie's animagus form, though i will give you a hint: no one in my comments or on tumblr has successfully guessed what his animagus form will be yet.

also - to the person who guessed goldfish, i just want you to know that that made me laugh so much that i now want to write a one-shot crack fic that's divergent from this one where regulus is actually a goldfish animagus

the gift.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was Christmas Day, and Regulus was going to kill his brother.

Well, his brother and Remus Lupin. He was going to kill them both. Or maybe lock them in a room together and refuse to let them out until they stop acting like idiots. It was bad enough when it was just Lupin smiling with Tonks, and his brother shooting hurt and angry looks at the two of them. It wasn't that Regulus cared who Lupin was with, but did it have to be a family member? Couldn't it be literally anyone else in the world?

It got so much worse when Regulus made the mistake of inviting Charlie Weasley to Grimmauld Place for Christmas.

He wasn't supposed to be there originally, Ron had mentioned more than once that he would probably stay in Romania for the holiday as he usually did. It was difficult for him to travel with the job he did, and Regulus got the distinct impression that Charlie didn't really like spending time with his parents. Not that Regulus could blame him for that.

However, Regulus had listened to Ron and Ginny complain more than once about missing him. Even Fred and George agreed once when they didn't think anyone was listening to them. Percy wasn't speaking much to the rest of the family, too up Minister Fudge's arse to realize that he was hurting the people he loved.

Regulus could empathize with missing a brother who refused to come home. He didn't really care for Percy though, especially after he sent a letter to Ron telling him to stay away from Regulus and Harry. However, Regulus had no strong feelings about Charlie Weasley, one way or another. He hadn't even met the man, though he'd heard Harry talk about him a few times after they met during the Quidditch World Cup.

So Regulus, feeling for the Weasleys he went to school with, decided to send a letter to Charlie offering to pay for him to travel back home for Christmas. He didn't think he would reply, but only a few days later Charlie responded.

Hello Regulus,

I'm surprised to hear from you of all people. However, I think you're right, it probably is time for a visit. Don't worry about paying for me to visit, that has never been the issue. Don't tell the others though. I want it to be a surprise.

Charlie

Regulus was pleasantly surprised, though he dwelled on the line "that has never been the issue" for more than a few days. The other family members were just as surprised, and Regulus had to admit, it was apt timing given the attack on Mr. Weasley. Charlie arrived the

day after their holiday was supposed to begin, the same day that Hermione suddenly showed up at their doorstep claiming that she'd bowed out of her family vacation so she could spend time with them.

It was all going well, even with the stress that Mr. Weasley's attack was having on all of them. He would survive, that was the important thing, but Regulus didn't think that Harry had recovered from witnessing the attack. He was still distant and jittery. He practically ran from any room that the Weasleys were in for two full days until Hermione showed up and helped him get his head on straight.

Regulus was almost looking forward to Christmas, even with Tonks and Lupin speaking quietly in the kitchen on Christmas morning. Regulus was the first one up and caught them having a serious conversation, Tonks looked strained, Lupin just looked bone tired.

"Good morning," Regulus greeted stiffly. *Great*, he thought, *Sirius is going to be a joy today*.

Sure enough, Sirius was in a terrible mood the moment he noticed Tonks, though Regulus had to admit Sirius was making a noble effort to hide it, but Regulus was worried he was going to have to spend the rest of the day coaxing Sirius out of his bad mood. That is until Charlie woke up shortly after noon and came down into the sitting room just as everyone was gathering around to open gifts.

They were planning to have a big celebration with all of them together, and then Regulus and Harry were going to open a few gifts together with Sirius later in the afternoon. It had been Harry's suggestion, wanting to surprise Sirius with their new animagus forms.

"Hey, Sirius, right? Sorry, I don't think we've been introduced yet," Regulus heard Charlie say. The two of them had been missing each other over the last few days, mostly because Charlie kept avoiding his mother, and Sirius kept avoiding everyone else.

"Oh, yes. Another Weasley, then," Sirius responded. He sounded rough, and Regulus knew he had only barely pulled himself away from glaring at Remus to remember to respond. Charlie, thankfully, just laughed.

"Yep, another one," he said. Regulus watched them interact for a moment, he was sitting in a chair on the other side of the room so he didn't think that either of them noticed him watching.

It took him a moment to realize what was happening, mostly because he was only watching Sirius try to hide whatever sad emotions he was feeling at the time. However, eventually, Charlie said something that made Sirius's face light up and suddenly they were talking in earnest. Both of them were leaning toward each other in excitement, and Charlie was reaching out a hand, almost unconsciously, and touching Sirius's upper arm.

Regulus's eyebrows raised. That was unexpected. He didn't know much about Charlie, but he would never have guessed he would be like this: overwhelmingly handsome, cheerful, charismatic, and very, very interested in Sirius. Regulus nearly laughed. He could still remember the way girls at school used to talk about Sirius, he would randomly overhear them

gossiping about who he was and was not dating, who he might be interested in, though none of them could ever figure it out. Regulus knew people were interested in his brother, but it had been a very long time since he'd seen that interest in action.

He smiled as he watched them, even as he dragged his eyes away. He didn't need to watch his brother get seduced by a young, attractive dragon tamer on Christmas. He was happy for him though, maybe now he would be less miserable. That was until he looked to the other side of the room and found that Lupin had abandoned whatever conversation he was having with Mrs. Weasley and was now staring daggers at Sirius and Charlie.

Regulus didn't think he'd ever seen that look on Lupin's face. The only thing close was the night of their confrontation with Peter Pettigrew, but even then there was a softness to him. There was no softness now, just warring emotions. Sirius didn't notice, not for a second, too wrapped up in whatever Charlie was telling him about the dragons he cared for.

Regulus rolled his eyes back into his skull, so far that it physically hurt. Of course. Of fucking course. He had been watching Sirius devolve into a play of aching loneliness for months because Lupin insisted on moving on right in front of him, but the moment Sirius dared to talk to someone else, Lupin was suddenly enraged.

Regulus didn't care. He did not care about this. He shook his head hard and looked away from all of them. They had to work this out for themselves. Regulus was not going to get involved.

"Should we open some presents?" he asked Ron and Harry who were now sitting near him, both of them shoving biscuits in their mouths at a rate that was far too quick.

"Yes, please," Hermione answered, walking over a second later. Sirius and Charlie separated long enough for them to pass presents around, but Regulus noticed more than once Charlie leaning over to whisper something in Sirius's ear. Sirius would bark a laugh every time, and Regulus found himself wondering if whatever Charlie was saying was even that funny, or if Sirius was just susceptible to a handsome man giving him attention.

Regulus opened the few gifts he'd been given by Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys. Mostly it was books, though Hermione's were all by muggle authors as per usual. He was beginning to build quite the collection with the constant gifts from Hermione, Lavender, and Parvati. He chuckled a bit when he noticed Hermione included a book filled with facts about his animagus form.

"Very funny," Regulus said with a half-smile at her.

"It could be useful!" she defended though she was smiling too.

"Here, open this one next. It's from me," Sirius said. Regulus hadn't noticed him walking up.

"I told you we're opening gifts together just the three of us," Regulus said quietly.

"This is a pre-gift," Sirius said with a wide smile, his eyes dancing with elation.

“Okay,” Regulus responded questioningly. It was a long nondescript box. “Oh, Merlin. Why did you do this?” he said the moment he opened it.

“Harry shared the good news with me!” Sirius shouted.

“Good news?” Charlie asked, leaning over Sirius’s shoulder to get a look at the stupidly expensive broom sitting across Regulus’s legs.

“It’s not good news,” Regulus corrected. “Umbridge gave Harry a lifetime ban from Quidditch. I’m just taking over the Seeker position until we figure out a way to get him reinstated.”

“Doubt that’ll happen while Umbridge is still at the school,” Harry said easily. Since discovering his animagus form, he’d been less bothered by his ban from Quidditch. If anything, he was extremely excited about Regulus joining the team, even if it was just temporary.

“Why were you given a lifetime ban?” Charlie asked. Lupin glared at him like he couldn’t believe he dared to ask a completely reasonable question.

“For fighting,” Harry muttered. “But it’s okay, Regulus is on the team now. Plus Ginny is joining as well as Beater.”

“Ginny! You didn’t tell me that!” Charlie shouted happily. Ginny blushed so hard that even the tips of her ears were red. “Congrats, Regulus. I played Seeker while at Hogwarts. I would be happy to give you some tips if you want.”

A laugh bubbled out of Sirius’s lips. “Thanks, Charlie,” Regulus said politely. “Sirius, you really didn’t need to buy a broom. I probably won’t be on the team that long.”

Sirius shrugged. “I wanted to.” Regulus gave him a small smile. The rest of the gift opening was uneventful, and eventually, they retired to the kitchen to eat Christmas dinner. Charlie sat right next to Sirius, and the two of them were wrapped up in another conversation as they ate, Lupin sitting a bit down the table next to Tonks, his eyes lingering on Sirius every couple of minutes. Tonks didn’t seem to notice as she chattered away happily to the man.

By the time Regulus climbed the stairs to Harry’s room so they could open gifts, he was comfortably full and very tired. Sirius was already sitting on the bed when Harry and Regulus walked in, and Harry walked right over to join him, smiling wildly and barely containing his excitement. Sirius looked just as thrilled, and Regulus wondered what he was up to. There was no way he could know about their animagus forms, right?”

Regulus closed the door quietly behind him and Harry looked up curiously. “Where is Remus? Isn’t he joining us?”

“Lupin?” Regulus asked. Sirius paled slightly, his excitement faltering.

“Yes, Regulus! He has to be included, you know, because...” Harry waved his hands around for a split second, looking like he couldn’t control himself.

“Fine. Hold on, I’ll go get him.” Regulus walked back down the stairs, hoping that Lupin would have already left and Regulus wouldn’t be forced to track him down. He was out of luck as he walked back into the sitting room to find Tonks and Lupin talking again.

“Hey, Regulus,” Tonks said. She had a look on her face that Regulus couldn’t interpret.

“Hello,” Regulus responded. “Lupin, we’re opening gifts in Harry’s room.”

“Oh, I thought —”

“Just the four of us,” Regulus cut him off to say. “Good evening,” he added as a goodbye to Tonks. She smiled at him, even though he was probably being terribly rude.

He turned his back on them immediately, heading back up the stairs and assuming that Remus was following. He heard Remus’s first footsteps on the stairs behind him the moment he reached the top, and he turned to see him heading up slowly, a confused look on his face. They hadn’t spoken, not really, and especially not about what Lupin may or may not know. Regulus didn’t really care about that right now though.

“I really would appreciate it if you would do that elsewhere,” Regulus said quietly.

“Do what?” Lupin asked tiredly.

“You know what?” Regulus hissed.

“I’m not doing anything. Tonks and I are only friends.”

“Oh, are you really?” Regulus responded with biting sarcasm. Lupin’s cheeks flushed bright red, a reaction that Regulus had not been anticipating.

“She does — did — have feelings for me,” Lupin said. “But there is nothing going on between us.” He sounded mortified, his voice so low that Regulus almost couldn’t hear it.

“Are you sure? It didn’t look that way to me.”

“Sirius is the one who —”

Regulus sighed sharply. He knew he shouldn’t have gotten involved, he said he wasn’t going to, why did he always do this nowadays?

“I don’t care about that, or who you spend your free time with, but Sirius isn’t well here on his own. He won’t leave, so he needs someone here to keep him steady. Otherwise, he might end up truly losing his mind and we will all suffer because of it.”

Lupin looked at him for a long moment. “I’ve been away —”

“On Order missions. I know, but can you please check up on him? Without Tonks coming along.”

Lupin flushed again. “There really isn’t anything going on.” He looked behind him like someone might be listening. “I’ve actually been —”

“I don’t care,” Regulus said, holding up a hand to stop him. “I just want Sirius safe and well.”

Remus nodded. Suddenly, a small smirk grew on his face. “You know, you’re a lot... sweeter than I remember you being.”

“Please, shut up,” Regulus said, blushing and turning on his heel to march into Harry’s room. Harry and Sirius were looking through a book of pictures when he opened the door. Sirius looked nervous when he saw Lupin enter the room.

“Great, okay, let’s do this,” Harry said, rambling slightly. Regulus smiled fondly.

“Yes, all right,” Regulus said.

“I’ll go first,” Sirius said, jumping up, a mask of excitement covering the unsettled look he wore a moment ago.

“Oh,” Regulus said, surprised.

“Yes,” Harry said at the same time, clearly he was in on whatever this was. Sirius walked to the wardrobe against the wall that Harry barely used. He flung it open and pulled out a large present and walked back over to set it down in front of Regulus.

Regulus looked at them curiously, but even Lupin was smiling. He settled down on the floor and slowly opened it. He gasped quietly. Inside was an ornate cage containing a black owl with bright gold eyes. Regulus sucked in a breath. He had never been allowed pets as a child, neither had Sirius. It wasn’t something he was even allowed to want during his first life. Something he had to learn to live without.

He looked up to see Sirius watching him with a look in his eyes like he knew exactly what Regulus was thinking.

“You got me an owl?” Regulus whispered, his voice embarrassingly wobbly.

Sirius grinned with all his teeth. “Yeah, figured you could use it.”

Regulus looked back down at the owl who was watching him curiously. He had to blink his eyes quickly as they filled with tears. He needed to get a grip. There was no reason to get this emotional over a present. Still, his brother had to remember how much Regulus loved animals when he was little, how he would whisper that he wanted an owl when he went to Hogwarts, speaking it like a forbidden secret.

“She’s a girl,” Harry said after a long moment of silence.

“You should name her,” Lupin added. He had a gentle smile on his face, it made him look younger.

Regulus looked at Sirius for a second, who just smiled, giving him one nod.

“I’ll call her Nyx,” he said quietly.

“That’s the perfect name,” Sirius said. The owl hooted once, looking satisfied.

“Okay, now it’s our turn,” Harry said. He was practically bouncing in his seat. Regulus set Nyx’s cage to the side, taking in Sirius’s and Lupin’s bewildered and curious faces.

“You go ahead,” Regulus said when he noticed Harry watching him.

“What’s happening?” Sirius asked, glancing between them. Regulus just shook his head and gestured toward Harry.

Harry sobered for a second, focusing intensely, and a moment later he was gone, replaced by the crow. Sirius and Lupin both gave a loud shout.

“What?” Lupin breathed, leaning back against the door like he was trying to get away. Sirius just jumped up.

“You — you’re — you —” Sirius stuttered.

Harry crowed and took flight, doing one loop around the room before landing on top of Sirius’s head. He had gotten much better at it in the last few weeks. Sirius’s eyes were opened so widely that they looked like they were going to pop out of his skull, but he was smiling again.

“You’re an animagus?” Sirius asked.

“Oh, Merlin,” Remus said. He looked like he was torn between laughing and getting sick.

Harry flew back to the ground and slowly transformed back, fully clothed this time thankfully.

“You’re an animagus!” Sirius shouted, this time it wasn’t a question. He hugged Harry immediately, who was laughing maniacally.

“Yes! We both are!” Harry shouted back.

“You both — you?” he turned to look incredulously at Regulus who smiled bashfully.

“Surprised?” Regulus said, mostly because what he actually wanted to say was, “Did you think I couldn’t do it?”

“What’s your form?” Lupin asked, his eyes bright with interest.

“It’s —”

“Just show them!” Harry interrupted. Regulus sighed quickly.

“You better back up,” he said, moving Nyx’s cage to the other side of the room. Lupin, Harry, and Sirius leaned back against the wall, each of them with wild looks on their face. He focused for a moment, settling into his body, and feeling the moment his nerve pain subsided as he settled onto all fours. There was a moment of silence as they all took him in, Harry grinning happily.

“You’re a bear!” Sirius shouted, and a split second later he was gone, replaced by Padfoot who launched himself at Regulus with very little preamble. Regulus took a halfhearted swipe at him. He was bigger than Sirius, probably for the first time in his life, and Sirius tumbled to the side when Regulus’s giant paw hit him. He rolled over and quickly jumped to his feet though, his tongue lolling out to the side.

“No! No, we’re not play-fighting in here,” Lupin said sternly, though he sounded a bit like he was holding back a laugh.

Padfoot whined quickly before shifting back to Sirius. “But he’s a bear!”

“Sirius, there is not enough room for you to wrestle with a bear in here.”

Regulus focused again, thinking about his human form, and slowly transformed back. It was always a punishment returning to his body, the pain sharper the moment he took a breath.

“I can’t believe you’re a bear!” Sirius shouted.

“Yes, I was surprised too,” Regulus said with a halfhearted laugh.

“We don’t even have bears here,” Lupin said, chuckling.

“That’s what Hermione said,” Harry said. “She said he was a black bear and that they only live in North America.”

“Wow,” Sirius said. “You’re never going to be able to hide with that.”

“Hermione also said that,” Regulus replied.

“When did you both do this?” Lupin asked.

“We’ve been planning it since the summer, but we transformed for the first time in November,” Harry replied.

“You’ve kept this a secret since the summer?” Sirius asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Harry replied proudly.

“We have to come up with names for them!” Sirius shouted, looking imploringly at Lupin. Lupin grinned back, his face soft with an emotion that Regulus had to look away from.

“Of course,” he muttered in reply.

Chapter End Notes

well, i hope you aren't disappointed. i know there were a lot of guesses for magical animals, but personally, I think it's a little too "main character y/n syndrome" to make a mc the only magical creature animagus in the universe.

shout out to witchydyke who semi-guessed it by saying regulus might be "a giant fucking bear" (i say semi because black bears are actually pretty small compared to other bears)

so anyway, why a crow and why a bear?

for harry, i am certainly not the first author to include harry becoming a crow animagus, but i feel like it's rare enough that i wanted to write it. there were a couple of reasons for this. crows symbolize death and rebirth and i felt like this was the perfect representation of harry's character as someone who canonically is tied to death and survives two killing curses. i also have always thought that harry's animagus would be some kind of flying creature considering how much he reveres flying.

the bear is a little more complicated. the symbolism for bears is all over the place, but the one standard i could find in a lot of definitions was that bears symbolize strength and learning to stand up rather than run when faced with an obstacle. i felt like this was a good representation of regulus's journey throughout the golden king as he learns to stand and fight.

also, bears typically subsist off of berries, foliage, fish, and small animals, but they will, on occasion, eat deer. it's very uncommon though. by the time a deer is a few months old they can usually outmaneuver a bear and by the time they are fully grown, they're usually faster. so for a bear, catching an adult deer is quite the prize.

the diadem part II.

Time seemed to move faster after Christmas Day.

Regulus and Sirius broke into Hogwarts the day before New Year's Eve. They had the map so they knew it was mostly empty, thankfully even Umbridge was missing. It wasn't too difficult, they took the floo to the Hog's Head Inn wearing heavy disguises, which meant no one paid them any mind as they walked out on the streets of Hogsmeade.

They broke into the Shrieking Shack and took the secret tunnel to get onto Hogwarts grounds. They hadn't told Dumbledore that they were doing this, though it would have no doubt been easier to accomplish this goal with his help. However, he wasn't easy to reach, and they didn't have time to waste.

Sirius transformed into Padfoot, and they used the invisibility cloak and the map to travel safely through the mostly empty castle, heading for the Room of Requirement. Regulus paced in front of it trying different thoughts to summon the door. Unfortunately, the door didn't seem to know about the object they were looking for. That or it simply didn't care.

I need somewhere to hide something where it will never be found, he tried. This was his fourth attempt. Sirius was sitting next to the empty wall, watching him with so much comical skepticism that Regulus could see it through Padfoot's face. It'll work, he wanted to tell him, it has to work.

Finally, the empty wall began to shift and a set of large double doors appeared. Sirius transformed the moment they were inside, looking around in awe as they both took in the absurd amount of objects that were hidden in the room. Piles and piles of junk and treasures unfolded before them in a sea of trash. It took them nearly eight hours to locate the diadem, though that was mostly because Sirius kept getting distracted by bizarre objects in the room and sidetracking them. It also didn't help that the longer they were in the room, the weaker Regulus got.

"Whose bust do you think this is?" Sirius said. Regulus gave a put-upon sigh.

"I don't know. Can we just..."

"Can we just what?" Sirius asked. Regulus didn't answer right away, staring at Ravenclaw's lost diadem that was sitting on the top of the bust. It wasn't even hidden. The Dark Lord had just left it out in the open for anyone to happen upon. His arrogance truly knew no bounds. Regulus wasn't sure why, but the diadem seemed to entice him. Without giving it a second thought, he reached out a hand and touched it. The moment his fingers brushed the cold metal, everything went black.

"Regulus, wake up!" Sirius shouted. Regulus tried to open his eyes, but it didn't seem like they were listening to him. Suddenly, a splash of cold water dropped right on his face. He gasped for air, shooting up.

“What was that for?” Regulus shouted. He was instantly distracted by their surroundings. They were still in the Room of Requirement, but the tall piles of lost treasures and junk looked like they had been violently swept back on all sides. “What happened?”

Sirius was looking at him, but his eyes were far away.

“Sirius, what happened?” He snapped his fingers in front of Sirius’s unfocused eyes.

“I saw James,” Sirius replied.

“You what?” His stomach swooped uncomfortably.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen them,” Sirius mumbled.

“Them?” Regulus breathed. Who else did he see?

“The hallucinations,” Sirius replied distractedly. “I thought I was getting better.”

“What happened to the diadem?” Regulus asked. He really didn’t want to talk about this.

“I destroyed it. James told me to destroy it with the fang, and I did.”

“Did it fight back?” Sirius answered by gesturing to the objects that had been flung back. Regulus nodded.

“Let’s get out of here.” They left Hogwarts just as they came, but the silence felt heavier now, both of them lost in thought. Once they were in the tunnel that led to the shack, Sirius transformed, and they tucked the invisibility cloak away. Regulus felt like he should say something, but he just didn’t know what.

“Race you!” Sirius shouted suddenly, leaping forward and transforming midair back into Padfoot.

“Hey, no fair!” Regulus replied. He paused to concentrate, and after a few long seconds, sunk into his animagus form. Regulus was pretty sure he could have caught up if they’d been anywhere other than a small tunnel, but alas, Sirius beat him. And if they wasted a good hour running around the shack in their animagus forms, well, no one else had to know.

They returned to Hogwarts in January with the news that Snape would be teaching Harry Occlumency, something Regulus could already feel going wrong before it even started. Only a few days into the spring term, their morning was interrupted by the Daily Prophet bringing some of the worst news yet.

“Bellatrix is out,” Regulus said to Sirius the moment his face appeared in the mirror. He looked grim and angry.

“I know,” he replied. The circles under his eyes looked especially dark today as if he was purposefully keeping himself awake for long stretches of time. “What do we do?”

“She might have a Horcrux.”

Sirius shook his head, but Regulus didn't think he was disagreeing with him. He was just frustrated, as was Regulus.

"She was crazy when they locked her up there," Sirius said. "Who knows how insane the dementors have made her."

"Do you think she'll be any less dangerous?" Sirius gave him a sardonic look as his answer. "Yeah, you're right."

They stared at each other for a moment, both lost in the shared memories they had of their cousin Bellatrix. Any Death Eater breaking out of Azkaban was a bad thing, but Bellatrix was by far the worst.

"I wonder where she'll be," Regulus said quietly, half to himself.

"The Lestranges broke out as well, but I doubt they'd go back to Lestrangle Manor. It's got to be swarming with Aurors right now."

"Do you think Narcissa would house her?"

"It's possible, they were still close at the end of the war. And with Lucius running back to being Voldemort's lapdog."

Regulus cringed slightly, though he couldn't disagree.

"Do you want me to look into it? I might still be able to get through their wards, I doubt they thought to change them since I went to Azkaban."

"No, Sirius," Regulus said exasperatedly. "I don't want you to leave the house at all."

"I thought you wanted me to move out of Grimmauld," Sirius replied. He looked like he was only half joking. Regulus huffed.

"Only if you're moving somewhere that's equally safe and hidden."

Sirius laughed a little as if Regulus's request was some kind of joke. "Right, of course. Okay, I won't check Malfoy Manor, but we should probably do something. If Bellatrix is out, it can only mean bad things."

"I know," Regulus said, frowning. "Have you heard from anyone else about this?"

"Only Remus," Sirius said. Regulus tried not to let the surprise he felt show on his face but he hadn't heard Sirius say Remus's name so calmly in weeks. "But he was only here for a little before he had to leave."

"Back on another mission?"

"I don't know," Sirius said slowly. He looked distracted again. "There's something — I think he's up to something."

“Up to something?” Regulus said alarmedly.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter,” Sirius said quickly.

“Should I be concerned?”

“No, it’s fine. Anyway, no one else has mentioned the breakout yet, but we’re supposed to have another meeting later this week. I need to ask Kingsley how it happened. I’m sure Moody will be pulled back in to search for them.”

There wasn’t much else to do except wait to hear more. Regulus couldn’t go hunting them down right now, not that he thought he could win a fight against Bellatrix. Rabastan maybe, Rodolphus definitely, but Bellatrix? He needed to start working harder in DA meetings.

The rituals he had been doing to repair his magical core had been working far better than expected. However, a week or two before the Christmas Holidays, he hit a wall. It seemed like he’d gotten to the place where he couldn’t improve it anymore without causing real damage to his body. The last time he did the ritual, he experienced so much nerve pain that he thought his body was on fire for a moment before it all calmed down. The only way forward now was time and good old-fashioned practice.

“Let me know what you hear at the meeting,” Regulus said. “I doubt I’ll hear anything unless it’s from you.”

“I will,” Sirius responded. “When is Harry’s first Occlumency lesson with Snivellus?”

“He met with him last night,” Regulus replied, ignoring the jab at Snape’s name. He wasn’t about to get between two grown men and their petty squabbles.

“How did it go?” Sirius asked, a dark look on his face.

“Fine.” Regulus had to work to keep his face neutral. It did not in fact go fine, but it would just make everyone miserable if Sirius learned about it and could do nothing to help. Sirius didn’t look like he believed him. “It would be better if you were the one teaching him.”

“You’re not bad at it either,” Sirius said, though his expression softened. “Why don’t you teach him?”

“I’m not sure I would be any good at that,” Regulus said honestly. “You were the one who could do it naturally. I always felt like I was fighting to maintain it.” He hated to admit the fact that he was worse than Sirius at any specific type of magic, but compliments were usually a good way to go when trying to distract him.

Sirius shrugged. “Maybe that’ll help. I never really had to learn, and neither did Snape if what Dumbledore said is true. It just came naturally to us. But you had to learn actual skills. That’s probably what Harry will have to do.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Regulus agreed uncertainly. “Doubt Dumbledore would swing for that though.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Sirius said solemnly.

They ended the call a few minutes later, though Regulus could tell that Sirius would have stayed longer if Regulus let him. He would have to make sure Harry called later tonight, he didn’t want Sirius to spend too much time feeling lonely. A few minutes after Regulus put the mirror down, Harry and Ron came back into the dorm room.

“How was Hagrid?” Regulus asked, tucking the mirror away in Harry’s trunk.

“Umbridge put him on probation,” Ron replied, an unhappy look marring his face.

“Already?” Regulus asked.

“Yep,” Harry answered. “I’m guessing she was just waiting for him to get back to do it. It’s probably her plan all along to get rid of him.”

“He’ll have to be extra careful,” Ron said.

“I’m not sure it’ll matter.” Both of them look at him with alarm. “Umbridge has a lot of sway here right now, if she wants Hagrid gone, then it’s only a matter of time.”

“How can you even say that?” Harry shouted. His anger was always just below the surface these days. Regulus tried not to let it bother him.

“It’s not forever. Umbridge is working in a cursed position. Something will happen, and then hopefully she’ll be gone.”

“Oh, right,” Harry said, but he didn’t look happy about it.

“I wonder if my dream will come true,” Ron said. “You know, the one about the giant beast in the forest.”

“I hope it does,” Regulus said. “There are all sorts of beasts in the forest. Maybe she’ll get attacked by a Quintaped.”

“Are there Quintapeds in the Forbidden Forest?” Hermione asked, having just walked into the dorm.

“Who knows?” Harry replied with a shrug, but he was smiling now, and Regulus counted that as a win. “We could always lure one there.”

“Yeah, let me just call up Charlie, I’m sure he’ll know where to find one,” Ron said sarcastically, letting out a giggle as he spoke. Hermione’s lips twitched like she was trying to hold in a laugh.

“Charlie would probably do it too,” Hermione agreed, all four of them collapsing into laughter.

The next day, as Harry was getting ready to head to his remedial Potions lesson, as Snape was forcing him to call it, Regulus got up to go with him. “What are you doing?”

“I need to talk to Snape,” Regulus said without elaborating. Harry followed him out of the common room with a question on his face. Two nights prior when Harry had had his first Occlumency lesson, he’d returned looking unsteady and irritated. Hermione was the first to ask how it went, and he mostly brushed off her concern, instead sharing a repeated dream he’d been having about the Department of Mysteries. Worrying, sure, but not as pressing as his meeting with Snape.

“Tell me how it really went,” Regulus had said later that night when they were alone, Ron snoring loudly in his bed.

Harry shrugged. “He just kept telling me to empty my mind and then would cast Legilimens on me.”

“What?” Regulus yelped. Ron’s snoring paused for a moment before continuing. “He’s already casting on you? It was your first lesson.”

“Yeah, I’m not very good at it,” Harry started to say.

“Of course not,” Regulus said. “You just started.” Harry shrugged again.

That conversation was the reason Regulus was marching to Snape’s office with Harry in tow. Harry’s ability to use Occlumency was vitally important, and he wasn’t going to let Snape mess it up just so he could play out the moves of an old grudge.

“Black, what are you doing here?” Snape drawled when he entered the office, though he tensed slightly when Harry entered as well, closing the door behind him.

“I’m here to observe,” Regulus said stiffly, crossing his arms and walking over to lean against the wall.

“Observe,” Snape repeated, irritation clear in his voice.

“Yes.” Harry looked between them uncertainly.

“Very well,” Snape said after a long few moments of tense silence. He didn’t look happy about this development, but for some reason, he didn’t fight it.

It was a long night. Snape was clearly on his best behavior, but Regulus was quick to jump in when he was even a little too harsh. For one, he didn’t think Snape should have been casting Legilimens at all yet. Harry didn’t know anything, and he had no natural talent for Occlumency. Snape’s teaching, if one could even call it that, wasn’t doing anything to help him.

Every time Regulus intervened, he could feel Snape growing more and more vexed. Regulus was pretty sure he was just going to start hexing him at some point, but Snape never did. Harry was exhausted and perhaps quietly entertained by the two of them, but he seemed to leave the meeting with at least a basic understanding of how to practice which was more than he came there with.

“I’m going to come back until I know you can be trusted. We both know that you can teach, there is no reason to make this harder than it needs to be.”

Snape looked like he was a second from exploding with rage, but Regulus didn’t let it affect him, simply walking out of the office and following Harry up to the dorm.

Occlumency meetings went better after that, especially after Snape had a moment to cool down, and Harry seemed to be improving a little with the first step of learning the skill. He was meditating most nights and seemed to get better each day at emptying his mind, but it wasn’t helping much with keeping the Dark Lord out.

“I’m not sure that regular Occlumency is going to work for him,” Snape admitted during the first week of February. They were alone, Regulus arriving a bit before Harry.

Regulus blew out a gust of air. “I was afraid of that. I didn’t think this kind of magic would come naturally to him.”

Snape seemed to weigh his next words carefully. “There are... other options.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not exactly Occlumency, not as you and I know it, but it’s similar. It’s at least a way to redirect someone if they enter his thoughts. I’m not sure that it would keep the Dark Lord out all the time though.”

Regulus sighed. “It’s worth a try. Maybe it’ll make his regular Occlumency skills better in the meantime.”

Snape nodded. He seemed to understand that Regulus was giving him permission to move forward, though Regulus wasn’t about to leave Harry alone yet. Snape had been behaving better, but Regulus still couldn’t be sure that he wouldn’t react badly if the two of them were left alone.

“Typical Occlumency works as a wall between your thoughts and the person trying to access them,” Snape explained to Harry after he arrived. He was paying very close attention. “They would be blocked entirely.”

“How is this different?” Harry asked. Snape looked annoyed at the interruption, but Regulus knew it was a good thing. Harry only interrupted like that if he was interested, and he needed to be interested in this in order to succeed.

“This method will work to disorient anyone who enters your thoughts so that they won’t find what they’re looking for.”

“Okay,” Harry said curiously.

“The idea is to lead them to other memories but to do it so quickly that they can’t focus enough to search for the ones they want.” Harry nodded. “This works best with,” Snape paused for a second, “embarrassing memories.”

Harry's eyebrows raised. "Embarrassing memories?"

"If the memories are filled with emotion, they will be more distracting. If the person entering your thoughts believes these are memories you are trying to hide, and you would certainly want to hide memories that embarrassed you, then it will be that much harder for them to get passed your defenses."

"Okay, I think I understand. How do I do it?"

"You need to visualize all of your memories so that you can bring them to the front of your thoughts, tucking the ones you want to hide deep in your head, layered behind the ones you plan to show."

It was slow going, teaching Harry this method, but they were making more progress with it than they were originally. Harry ultimately settled on what he began to refer to as the "cinema method." He explained to Sirius and Regulus about the cinema he was allowed to go to only once when he was a child, and how each room would show a different muggle film. He started organizing his thoughts, his embarrassing thoughts, at Snape's request, into different muggle film rooms so that if someone entered his head, they would be led to them and unable to find the ones he truly wanted to hide. Regulus wasn't sure that he fully understood, but Harry seemed to be motivated, so he let it lie.

Valentine's Day brought with it the first Hogsmeade visit of the new year. Regulus had originally planned to do a little shopping, nothing special, that day, but Hermione had other plans.

"I want Harry to meet me at the Three Broomsticks, I have an idea, but..."

"But?" Regulus asked. She had found him alone in the library, trying to finish a bit of schoolwork before his latest meeting with Snape and Harry.

"I'm not sure if it's a good idea. I was so sure about the charm to protect the DA, but it was the wrong choice. What if this one is too?" She looked at him pleadingly as she spoke.

"Well, why don't you tell me what your idea is and we can talk through it?" Regulus said patiently, setting aside the essay he was writing.

Hermione went on to admit that she had discovered Rita Skeeter's secret, apparently, she was an unregistered beetle animagus, and Hermione had kept her in a jar against her will for an extended period of time. She wouldn't clarify how long exactly which Regulus found wildly entertaining.

"Okay," Regulus said as evenly as he could manage. It was truly devious, but Regulus had to admit that he was impressed.

"No one believes Harry, and the *Daily Prophet* keeps publishing lies about him. I was thinking if he could just get his story out there, then maybe he could convince people."

"And Rita Skeeter is involved in your plan how?"

"Well, I was thinking that I could get her to write the article, people seem to trust her even if most of her reporting is nonsense."

"Where would we publish it? I doubt the *Daily Prophet* would take the story, even from Rita."

"Yeah," Hermione agreed, looking extremely uncomfortable and oddly embarrassed.

"What?"

"I was thinking... maybe we could publish it in the *Quibbler*."

Regulus's jaw dropped. "The magazine run by Luna's father? I thought you believed it was full of lies."

"It is full of lies," she insisted. He raised his eyebrows in question. "But we have to publish the truth somewhere, and Luna said that she and her father both believe Harry. It just makes sense."

"Did you talk to Luna about this?"

"Yes," Hermione said, sounding vaguely offended that Regulus would even ask. "She thinks it's a great idea."

"I'll admit I'm surprised that the two of you managed to agree on something," he said, working hard to keep the judgment out of his tone.

She bristled regardless. "Somethings are more important than petty disagreements."

"I agree," he said. "I think this is a good idea. It's risky, Umbridge is likely to come down hard on us, but I think it would be worth it. We should check with Harry first though, he's likely the one that will incur the wrath of that woman."

"I'm surprised you're agreeing," Hermione admitted. "You've worked so hard to keep him safe from her."

"Yes, but now that those Death Eaters have broken out of Azkaban, we're bound to have bigger enemies than Fudge and his lackey."

Hermione folded her lips under her teeth to hold in a laugh, though her eyes were worried. "Do you think they'll come after Harry?"

"Almost certainly," Regulus said. There was no use trying to hide the truth from them, especially from Hermione. She understood just as well as everyone the constant danger that was headed after them. "So, talk to Harry. If he agrees, then we should schedule a meeting."

"Okay," she said cheerfully. The anxiety was still there, but Hermione did best when she had an action plan, and this plan was as good as any. He wondered if he should warn Draco or Theo, their fathers would no doubt be included in the article. He decided he would, the day before the Hogsmeade trip.

“Draco,” he hissed just as Draco walked past his hiding space in a small alcove behind a large, hanging, ornate rug.

He looked around for a second before scampering behind the rug. “What’s going on?” There was a crease between his eyebrows.

Regulus desperately wanted to ask him about his parents, how involved they were and if Bellatrix was going to be making an appearance in their home, but he held his tongue. At worst, it would cause Draco to turn against him, Harry’s safety be damned. At best, it would just put him in more danger. If any of them discovered Draco’s intention to help Regulus, it wouldn’t end well for him. He doubted that Lucius would take well to his son’s betrayal. Bellatrix would be even worse.

“There’s something you should know,” Regulus said. “Harry is planning to talk to the press about what happened during the Triwizard Tournament.”

Draco’s eyebrows furrowed even further. “Okay,” he said slowly.

“Your father will likely be indicated.” Draco was silent for a long few minutes, his face racing between warring emotions. Regulus watched him in silence, letting him work through his feelings without interruption.

“What will happen to him?” Draco whispered.

“Nothing right now,” Regulus said. “If the Ministry wanted to move against him they would first have to admit that the Dark Lord was back, and they probably aren’t going to do that unless they’re forced to.”

Draco breathed out a sigh of relief. “There haven’t been any other updates about the special group of prefects,” Draco said after a moment. Regulus was surprised that he moved on so quickly, but he let him do it without objection.

“What is she waiting for?”

“I don’t think she can do it unless she’s Headmistress. At least, that’s what Blaise said.” Draco frowned, the idea that one of his friends could have figured something out before him was probably irritating.

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen.”

“Dumbledore isn’t a good headmaster either,” Draco argued instantly.

“At least he doesn’t permanently scar his students for speaking out of turn,” Regulus snapped back. “I know you don’t like him, but Umbridge would be far, far worse.”

Draco ultimately agreed, and Regulus left the conversation feeling a little calmer. At least Draco would be prepared for the storm to come. He told Theo the next morning, right before they headed out to Hogsmeade, but he looked unresponsive and barely said a word beyond nodding.

Theo was a bit confusing to Regulus. He was quiet and had been since he started school, but he also seemed desperate for companionship. Regulus had invited him to the DA with hopes that he would make friends with Seamus and maybe Dean, however, Fred and George ended up being the ones to take him under their wing. Regulus didn't know what the three of them talked about, but it was clear that the twins were interested in whatever Theo had to say. He could only hope that he wouldn't be too shaken by his Death Eater father, but Regulus knew better than anyone how hard it could be to turn against your parents.

They passed Cho on the way to the Three Broomsticks. She looked tense but gave a small smile when she noticed Harry walking with the rest of them.

"She's going to meet Cedric," Luna said, some mysterious emotion in her voice that Regulus had trouble deciphering.

"Whatever awaits here isn't good," Ron said, shaking his head. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You're just making things up," she said.

"Says you," Ron snipped.

The two of them continued to bicker as they made their way through the streets before finally making it to the Three Broomsticks, quickly finding a table tucked away in the back. Rita arrived just as their butterbeers did. She was just as delightful as the last time he saw her, which is to say that she was a complete terror and her very gaze made Regulus's skin crawl. Getting Rita to show even a modicum of respect was a bit like pulling teeth, but Regulus was sure by the end of the interview that they had done the best they could. All that was left to do was wait.

That and prepare for his first Quidditch match as the Gryffindor seeker which was looming on the horizon.

the patronus.

Regulus used to love Quidditch. During his first life, it was one of the few moments of true freedom that he experienced. Though he played on a team, and there was always his captain that he had to listen to, he still felt truly independent out on the Quidditch pitch. Perhaps it was the act of flying itself or the fact that the Seeker worked largely alone throughout the game. He wasn't sure. All he knew was that playing Quidditch was the perfect distraction from the things that weighed him down in his first life.

He wasn't positive that that feeling carried over into his second life. Though he found that flying was still enjoyable, it was now stained by the constant pain from his nerve damage. He could really only manage to stay on a broom for about half an hour at a time before he would have to rest. He was sure this would cause Angelina, the Gryffindor team captain, to kick him off the team, or at the very least yell at him, but she seemed to have endless patience for his struggling.

During the week leading up to the game, Regulus was growing increasingly nervous. He did his best to bury the feeling though, mostly because he didn't think Ron would survive if he had to carry someone else's pre-game anxiety along with his own. Still, his hands were shaky and his muscles would randomly clench in pain, these were among the least painful side effects of the nerve damage that riddled his body.

They had a DA meeting the night before, but half the room was distracted by something or other. Ron didn't come, opting instead to practice alone out on the pitch. They tried to talk him out of this, tried to encourage him to give his body time to rest, but he couldn't bear to stay still longer than a few minutes, and eventually, even Hermione was shoving him out the door, his nervousness rubbing off on her.

That wasn't the only distraction at the meeting though. Only fifteen minutes or so into the lesson, Cho miscast a spell that sent Michael Corner flying halfway across the room. She dropped her wand instantly and covered her mouth with both hands.

"Woah, okay. Let's try to be careful," Harry said. There was a chuckle in his voice, but he looked at Cho with a glint of respect. Regulus was pretty sure Cho didn't notice it though because the moment Harry spoke Cho burst out in loud sobs and sprinted from the room. Her friend glared at Harry who now looked completely bewildered, before she ran out of the room to chase Cho down. It took them a while to get back on track after that, it seemed like nearly everyone was more interested in breaking off into side conversations about why Cho was crying.

"Oh, that wasn't your fault, Harry," Luna said later that evening once everyone else was gone. She stayed back along with Hermione, Lavender, and Parvati to help Harry and Regulus clean up the room.

"Are you sure? I didn't mean to hurt her feelings or whatever," Harry said, frowning.

"Oh, no. Cho's been like that for weeks now. She and Cedric broke up."

“They did? I thought they were together on Valentine’s Day?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, but apparently that’s when it happened,” Parvati said happily, the sparkle of fresh gossip in her eyes.

“I heard it was because Cho *cheated* on Cedric,” Lavender added salaciously.

“Are you making that up?” Hermione asked, furrowing her eyebrows.

“No, Padma told us,” Parvati said.

“A few people at Madam Puddifoot’s overheard them too. Cedric accused her of kissing someone else, and she didn’t even deny it.” Lavender gave a high-pitched laugh.

Luna watched them impassively, though she nodded slightly like this explained something for her.

“Who else did she kiss?” Harry asked.

“No idea, but I would kill to find out,” Lavender responded.

Regulus was still thinking about it while he dressed for the game the next day. He was loaded up with enough pain potion to knock out a hippogriff, but as long as he stayed conscious that was all that mattered. Well, that and catching the snitch, but he thought he had a good chance of doing it before the Hufflepuff Seeker who was new this year.

Ginny was mumbling to herself as they walked out toward the pitch, tossing the beater’s bat from one hand to another.

“Excited?” Regulus asked her. She grinned at him.

“Beyond excited,” she whispered back. She looked at their teammates for a moment, but none of them were paying much attention to their conversation. “A bit nervous,” she added with a half-frown.

“Did you ever play beater growing up?”

“Not really, Fred and George were always the ones to do it. I usually played chaser or seeker when we had family games. Charlie always beat me to the snitch though.”

Regulus chuckled. “Yeah, he seems like he was a pretty good player.”

“He got a few offers to join some professional teams, but he was more interested in moving to Romania. Mum was furious, said he was throwing away a lucrative career for one that could kill him in a month.”

“Ah, that explains why he doesn’t visit much.”

Ginny half shrugged. “Dad was always supportive, but I don’t think Mum ever really got over it.”

“Are either of them coming to this game?”

“No,” Ginny replied, shaking her head. “They only really came when Charlie was on the team, after he graduated, they stopped coming. Guess they figured that the rest of us weren’t likely to make a career out of it so there was no point.”

Regulus had to work to contain his shock at the words. That was the exact kind of thinking that his parents had, the idea that if it didn’t benefit you financially or give you some kind of power over others, then it was worthless.

“I don’t know,” Regulus responded as evenly as he could manage. “I think you’re pretty good.”

“Not Ron?” she whispered. Ron was several yards in front of them talking quietly to Angelina.

“Maybe Ron, though honestly, I think he would be miserable doing this for a job. He’s more a collaborative type than a competitive one.”

Ginny gave him an appraising look before nodding seriously. “I think you’re right.”

Regulus had watched Ginny practice loads of times by that point, but it was different during the game. She was beyond brutal with her bat. Fred and George were always solid beaters, but there was a playfulness to them as if they were just toying with the opposing team. Ginny was the opposite, she hit directly and fiercely, her teeth bared harshly at everyone.

It was a good thing though — even if Regulus was vaguely worried that she might kill a Hufflepuff while they were out there — because Ron was seriously struggling to block the chasers. Luckily for him, and for Regulus as well given the way the pain potion was already beginning to wear off, the snitch was an easy find today.

The Hufflepuff seeker wasn’t bad exactly, but he wasn’t anywhere near the skill level that Cedric had been. He seemed more interested in hovering around Regulus as he circled the pitch. When Regulus spotted the snitch gleaming in the sunlight on the opposite side of where he was, he slowly drifted over, waiting until the last possible second to dive and snatch it up, his ridiculously expensive broom outflying the poor Hufflepuff seeker behind him. Just in time too, as the Hufflepuff chasers had just scored their fourteenth goal, bringing the final total to 150-140 for Gryffindor.

The rest of February and all of March passed in a blur. Regulus’s time was packed full of DA meetings, Occlumency training, Quidditch practice, and a ridiculous amount of classwork as O.W.L.s approached. He was exhausted, to say the least.

Umbridge had begun making more changes inside Hogwarts, one of the biggest ones was when she fired Trelawney, attempting to expel her from the grounds the moment she was sacked. Dumbledore was able to keep her at the school, though not as a professor, and instantly replaced her with a professor that no doubt made Umbridge even angrier: the centaur Firenze.

Ron, Lavender, and Parvati were the only ones to comfort Trelawney as she was led back into the castle. Firenze, once he began teaching classes, took an instant interest in Ron. Regulus was curious about what they would talk about, Ron stayed after class nearly every day, but he had too much on his plate to worry about it yet. However, he had to admit that he enjoyed having Firenze, who Regulus felt was a much better professor, even if he was also a little disconnected from reality.

His exhaustion wasn't helped by the fact that the Occlumency training wasn't working the way it needed to. Harry was getting better at his "cinema" method, but he was still accessible while he was asleep. Regulus knew of at least one vision that he'd had, but he was pretty sure there was more. Harry seemed embarrassed when he mentioned it, so Regulus was sure he was keeping the rest to himself out of fear of judgment.

"I'm not sure what else to do," Regulus said to Sirius one night. Sirius sighed tiredly.

"What does Snape say?"

It was almost disappointing to hear Sirius say Snape's name, it just indicated how serious this all was. If Sirius could drop his feud to talk about it, then it was truly life and death. Not that Regulus didn't already know that, but it made it worse having his ridiculous brother confirm it.

"He's at a loss, other than going back to teaching standard Occlumency there isn't much he can do. I doubt that will be any time soon, it really doesn't come naturally to him."

Regulus felt helpless as he had so many times in his first and second life. His impotence knew no bounds apparently.

The Quibbler article had been released at the end of February and of course, Umbridge cracked down hard on it. That just meant that it was way more popular than it probably would have been otherwise. It worked well though, and more and more students seemed to believe Harry. Regulus was worried that she would give him a detention for it, but they managed to skate by without that happening. She did ban both of them from Hogsmeade, but that hardly mattered in the grand scheme of things.

Of course, now she was obsessively interested in what they were doing with the DA. According to Draco, she knew they were meeting in secret, but she couldn't figure out where, and she didn't know how to discover it. His final warning was the most peculiar one.

"I think she's planning to use Veritaserum to question everyone. I hope you're prepared for that."

Regulus hoped so too, though he didn't get to find out how his Tongue Tying Jinx worked against Veritaserum until a week or so later when Harry joined them in the DA meeting crying with laughter about his most recent meeting with Umbridge. Regulus had warned everyone not to drink anything Umbridge gave them, but Harry, being himself, had forgotten this advice.

“I drank the tea,” he said, still laughing. “I forgot that you told us not to until a second after I took a sip. I was about to run out of the room when she asked where we were meeting. I don’t think she was expecting me to say we were meeting inside Snape’s trousers.”

“What?” Fred shouted.

Regulus rolled his eyes, swallowing down his frustration that Harry had ingested the Veritaserum when he had worked so hard to keep him from doing so. “It’s the Tongue-Tying Jinx, it keeps you from sharing what you know.” He was relieved it actually worked.

“You made it say that we’re meeting in Snape’s trousers?” Ron asked, laughing as well.

“No, it’s unique to the person. That’s just what Harry’s mind thinks is the most ridiculous version of where we’re meeting.”

“Oh, so if we tried to tell anyone what we were doing, each of us would say something different, but equally insane?” Hermione asked, her eyes lighting up with intrigue at this new form of magic.

“Didn’t you read up on it when Regulus first suggested it?” Ron asked. He didn’t sound snide, but Hermione blushed like she had been insulted.

“I forgot,” she mumbled. A look of concentration crossed her face before she opened her mouth to say, “We’re all planning to fail our O.W.L.s.” She covered her mouth with one hand, her eyes wide with shock. “Wow, it really works.”

That seemed to unravel everyone in the room who wasn’t already laughing. Of course, the most ridiculous thing Hermione could imagine was that they were all meeting up so that they could fail their exams. They all seemed to break off into groups, everyone taking turns trying out the curse that Regulus had put on the sheet of paper where everyone signed their name.

It was a good thing they were all in such high spirits as today was the day they started learning how to cast Patronuses. Harry was a good teacher, had been since the first meeting, but he really soared when instructing everyone on this particular spell. It took Regulus a bit to realize it was because Lupin taught Harry personally how to do it. He already knew how to help everyone.

Regulus watched as everyone attempted the spell over and over again that evening, not participating himself given that he was sure he wouldn’t be able to do it, and he had no desire to publicly embarrass himself. Harry’s crow was soaring above the room as he walked around to help people.

Hermione’s otter and Ron’s Jack Russell terrier seemed to erupt from their wands at the same moment, both of them engaging the other instantly. Luna was also successful, a hare bouncing around her as she smiled happily. It was quite a display seeing so many animals in such a small space. Most of the DA members weren’t able to conjure a corporeal one, but a lot of them were at least able to successfully use the spell and that could save their lives if it came down to it.

“Why didn’t you try?” Harry asked him as they were walking back to the common room. They were the last ones to leave, using the map to make sure they weren’t caught after curfew.

Regulus shrugged. “I’ve never been able to cast one,” Regulus said. He saw no point in lying to Harry. “I doubt that’ll change now.”

“Why weren’t you able to cast one?”

Regulus weighed his options for responding. It felt like too much of a downer to tell Harry about his terrible, lonely childhood, the years he spent grieving his relationship with James, or the loss of his only brother. Harry must have seen what he wasn’t saying on his face.

“A lot of good things have happened since you last tried,” he said, not even bothering to ask when that might have been. There was no way for him to know when that was, but he must have correctly assumed that it hadn’t been for a while. “I know you don’t have — well, the thing with my dad...”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Regulus interrupted. Harry flushed bright red.

“There has to be something else. You never know when you might need to cast it, especially if dementors are going to be randomly attacking us.” He gave him a pleading look, not taking his eyes off of him for even a second.

Regulus sighed. “I’ll try,” he said. “But not tonight. I doubt I’d have the energy.”

Harry nodded, seemingly satisfied. Regulus didn’t really know why he cared so much, it was Regulus’s job to keep Harry safe, not the other way around, but if it meant that much to him then Regulus would attempt it.

It wasn’t until the next day that he got the chance. He still wasn’t attending Care of Magical Creatures so he had a free period that wasn’t filled with some other task. He had met with Hagrid just a week before to discuss his preparations for his O.W.L., but it seemed like Regulus might be better prepared for it than Hagrid could make him. So with his free period, and his lack of pressing schoolwork, he decided to lounge in his dorm.

He wasn’t planning to try the spell then, but he kept thinking about the worried look in Harry’s eyes. *There has to be something else*, Harry had said. Regulus wondered if he was thinking of something specific, some memory that Harry was present for that he hoped Regulus could use to summon even a non-corporeal Patronus.

He didn’t know what he could be talking about, but he felt bad, like if he didn’t try then he would be letting him down. He sighed heavily, burying his face in his pillow for a few minutes to stave off the frustration. He flopped onto his back, staring up at the canopy above his bed, the red bright in the early afternoon sun.

What memory could he use? Any of the ones featuring James were out, even the few happy ones that he had. There was too much pain, regret, and anguish tied up with them. Not to mention that he would rather claw his own eyes out than think about them in any detail.

Really any memory from his first life wasn't helpful. There was so much sadness there, it was hard to parse out anything that would be happy enough for a Patronus. He slowly went through everything he could think of since he started his second life. There had to be something. Harry was sure and he couldn't let Harry down.

Finally, he settled on one. A recent one. Right after Sirius gave him Nyx, a healed wound from their shared childhood, when Regulus turned into a bear, and Sirius's first response was to transform as well so they could play. It was so childish, so silly, so unlike every interaction they had had since they were both very little. Harry's laughter in the background added another layer to it, a shine of joy and contentment.

"Expecto Patronum," he whispered. At first, nothing happened, but he let the memory fill him, let it spread from his chest out to the tips of his fingers, warming him completely. He took a breath. *"Expecto Patronum,"* he repeated.

He opened his eyes just as the light jumped out of his wand. He was still lying flat on his back, so it hovered above him. At first, he thought it didn't have a shape, just a burst of mist floating above him, but after a second, it was like his eyes finally focused.

His mouth fell open, his eyes widening slightly. His chest clenched so painfully that he thought he might pass out for a second. The patronus vanished. He wasn't sure if he was the one to do it, or if his magic just gave out, the happy memory escaping him the moment he saw the patronus. He was so stupid. He expected a bear, he didn't expect —

He was pathetic. It didn't matter if Harry wanted him to try this spell, he wasn't going to tell anyone that he was able to do it. He could never risk anyone seeing. He turned onto his side and clenched his eyes closed, but even in the darkness he could still see it — the stag sprinting around above him.

the lie.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The worst day of Regulus's life started as most mornings did: with exhaustion and a day full of exams.

Well, just one exam. There was, thankfully, only History of Magic left after two weeks of O.W.L.s and the long grueling weeks spent preparing for them prior to that. Regulus was run ragged, and he was beyond thankful that he wouldn't have to think about stupid O.W.L.s again. Unless, of course, he somehow de-aged again and had to do this all over. He didn't think that was likely, and anyway, Harry would have aged out of school by that point. Harry's kids would be on their own.

The months leading up to O.W.L.s had been filled with nonstop anxieties and tasks. They had their final game against Ravenclaw, an easy win considering Cho was barely present, still shaken up from her breakup with Cedric. Regulus felt a little bad beating her. Not bad enough to let her win, of course, he was still sorted in Slytherin once upon a time.

They won the Quidditch Cup after that. Not that Regulus cared much about it. What he did care about was the fact that Remus showed up to the game with Sirius next to him transfigured to look like the same crup that Remus brought to the Triwizard Tournament tasks. It was risky with Umbridge in attendance, but she didn't do much beyond glare at the man. Regulus was just relieved to see them acting normally, though it didn't escape his attention the space between them. Even as a dog, Sirius seemed to be keeping Remus at arm's length.

They didn't get much of a chance to talk that day or the days after. The afternoon before O.W.L.s began, Sirius called Regulus on the mirror. He still looked awful, though his eyes were bright, and he didn't look drunk or hungover, which was about all Regulus could ask for these days.

"Dumbledore came by," Sirius said instantly before Regulus could ask about him and Remus.

"What?" Regulus asked, shocked.

Dumbledore had been unceremoniously ousted as the Headmaster of Hogwarts nearly a month and a half before. Regulus still didn't quite understand what happened. Fred and George decided they'd had enough of Umbridge and her terrorizing the school. They didn't care about their N.E.W.T.s and had more than enough money at that point to start their own business.

Regulus only heard about their plans after the fact, but it wasn't a secret that they were done dealing with Umbridge. Their pranks had been ramping up, even going so far as to use the technique they used on Hermione. Regulus still didn't know if Umbridge noticed the odd

hoping she would do occasionally or the ribbits that came out of her throat now and then. Even watching that wasn't enough to get them to stay.

They made a grand exit in April, dropping a horrible swamp all over the school that still had lingering effects weeks later. Umbridge was driven mad by it, especially because none of the other professors would help remove it from the school, including Dumbledore. She was given permission from Fudge to search Fred and George's dorm room, stomping back down into the Gryffindor common room afterward looking triumphant with a letter from Dumbledore clutched in her fist. The letter supposedly proved that Dumbledore was the one who told Fred and George to do it.

Regulus was pretty sure the letter was faked, actually, he was sure the entire school thought it was fake, but for the time being, there wasn't anything they could do. Especially after Dumbledore accepted credit for it and made a quick getaway before he could be questioned any further. Regulus hadn't heard anything from Dumbledore since.

"He found another one," Sirius said, snapping Regulus back to the moment.

"Another —"

"Horcrux," Sirius said quickly.

Regulus gasped. "How? Where?"

"He said he would explain where over the summer, but the important part is that it's been destroyed. We used one of the fangs here. The strangest thing though, a part of it came off after the fact. The fang couldn't destroy it."

"What do you mean part of it came off?" Regulus asked worriedly.

Sirius waved him off. "Dumbledore is sure the Horcrux itself is gone, but we're going to hold onto it for the time being. When you get home for the summer we can use you to check it. If you get sick around it, then we'll know we have to try something else to fully destroy it."

Home. The word made Regulus pause for a second, it sounded so odd coming out of Sirius's mouth. Especially given that he was referring to their childhood home. He pushed past the feeling, now wasn't the time to get swallowed up with thoughts of his past life.

It was a solid idea though, using him to check the Horcrux. At least they had it in their possession. Regulus couldn't do much about it given the two weeks of exams he had before him, but it still was good to know. Dumbledore was definitely staying busy even in his unemployment, hunting Horcruxes.

It was a day full of bizarre news apparently because later that night Harry and Hermione pulled Regulus and Ron aside to tell them about the giant that Hagrid was keeping in the forest.

"What — why?" Regulus asked.

“Well, he thinks that Umbridge is going to fire him, and he wants someone else to know about Grawp. He’s Hagrid’s half-brother,” Hermione said earnestly.

“Its name is Grawp?” Ron asked bewilderedly.

“His, Ronald, not its.”

“No, no, not why did he tell you,” Regulus interrupted, shaking his head fiercely. “Why does he even have him in the forest?”

Neither of them could provide an answer that he thought was satisfactory, but for the time being he had to let the issue lie. Hagrid was probably right that his days were numbered now that Umbridge was in charge, but surely a giant in the Forbidden Forest could take care of itself. Himself. Whatever.

With Dumbledore gone, they decided to end their DA meetings. It was getting too risky, and Umbridge finally had free reign to create her Inquisitorial Squad full of pureblood students. They would be sniffed out eventually, and they had already learned a great deal in their time together so it wasn’t too much of a loss to stop them.

They spent their final meeting having a party together. Theo came with Daphne in tow and Regulus, for the first time in five years, witnessed Theo laugh. Ron, who usually avoided the Slytherins at all costs, said something to him that Regulus didn’t hear, and Theo smiled before letting out a loud chuckle that seemed to surprise even him.

Next thing they knew, O.W.L.s were upon them. Regulus, in all his arrogance and unending self-hatred, decided that the best course of action was to take every single O.W.L. that he could. In retrospect, he could have just taken the ones he went to classes for and left the others to a past version of himself, but he just couldn’t let it go. It started because Umbridge was there lording over McGonagall as she tried to give him career advice earlier in the year.

“Have you thought about your career options?” McGonagall asked stiffly. Umbridge shifted slightly like the mere mention of Regulus having a future made her unhappy. It definitely did.

“No,” he said honestly. “I’ll probably be expected to take over as Lord of the family eventually. Beyond that, I’m not sure I’ll pursue a career.” It was almost word for word the answer he gave to Slughorn last time, but it still worked. Of course, Sirius was Lord now, and they had no plans for Regulus to take over. Not to mention that Regulus was almost certain he wouldn’t survive the war against the Dark Lord. Not that he even wanted to. He wasn’t about to mention that to McGonagall though.

“Are you sure? You are a very gifted student. There are many fields you could pursue quite successfully if you put your mind to it.”

Umbridge cleared her throat with a condescending, “Hem-hem.” She must have been doing it all day because McGonagall snapped at her instantly.

“Yes, what do you need?” McGonagall said, turning dark eyes on the woman.

The two of them devolved into an argument about the lack of a future Regulus would have given the fact that he was a murderer — he'd forgotten about that for the most part, and he had to work to fight off a panic attack that threatened to overtake him when he thought about Barty, lost to madness and killed at the magical hands of James Potter. The conversation ended with Regulus demanding to take all twelve O.W.L.s just to prove that he could, and McGonagall, in her fit of rage, allowing it.

Nearly two weeks into O.W.L.s, Regulus was thoroughly regretting his decision. He had barely a month to prepare for exams that he hadn't taken a class for in many years, and though he remembered a lot, he was certainly not in a place where he could reasonably pass their O.W.L.s. He ended up spending almost every free moment studying, only Hermione was studying more than him, and he doubted that she was even sleeping anymore.

It was finally the last day though, he had successfully completed all of his O.W.L.s except for one: History of Magic. He had it in the late afternoon, which was good because Regulus was worn out and didn't feel like moving until at least lunchtime. Harry looked just as tired, not a surprise given that it was nearly four in the morning before everyone went to bed the night before.

They had their Astronomy O.W.L. last night, and Hagrid had been removed from the school during it, although apparently, Umbridge was planning to arrest him rather than fire him as she showed up at midnight on his door with five Aurors. He sprinted out the front gate with his dog, Fang, running behind him. McGonagall tried to intervene but was hit with a number of Stunning Spells which left her in the Hospital Wing. It was distressing to witness, and clearly, Harry was very affected by it if the dark circles under his eyes and the indignant look on his face were any indication.

They entered the Great Hall at two o'clock for the exam, and Regulus could already feel his focus slipping. He just wanted the exam to be over so that he could go back to the dorm and sleep for two days. He was so thankful that the year was almost finished. Soon he would be back at Grimmauld with Harry and Sirius, spending the summer making headway on the Horcrux hunt.

"Turn over your papers," one of the professors running the exam said. "You may begin..."

Regulus had always been a skilled test taker. Even in his first life, he could skate by in classes because he would always do well on the final exam. This one was no different, especially because he had already taken this exact O.W.L. years ago. The other ones had been updated, at least a little bit, but History of Magic was exactly the same. He rushed through the questions, especially thankful that this was just a written exam. His magical core was not completely recovered, and with the constant exams, he was beginning to wonder if it would ever be.

He was just nearing the end of the questions when screaming suddenly erupted in the Hall around him.

He looked over sharply to see Harry flinging himself to the ground, his nails scraping at the scar etched on his forehead. Regulus was up and out of his seat before he could think about it, making it to Harry's side before the professors could intervene.

“Harry. Harry, wake up,” Regulus hissed. Harry’s eyes shot open, and just for a split second, Regulus was sure he saw a flash of red. He shook his head hard, he had to be imagining it.

“Sirius,” Harry whispered.

“What’s going on?” one of the professors said.

“He needs to go to the Hospital Wing,” Regulus responded.

“I’ll take —”

“No, I’ve got it,” Regulus interrupted. “I’ve finished with my exam. You can collect it. Come on, Harry.” He grabbed Harry by the arm and all but dragged him out of the Great Hall. He had a sheen of sweat across his forehead. He looked like he might be sick in a moment.

“Voldemort’s got Sirius,” Harry said once they were in the relative privacy out of the Great Hall doors.

Regulus’s knees buckled, and he nearly fell to the floor, his world tilting on its axis as he tried to get a grip on what Harry had said.

“What?”

“I saw it. Just now. When I fell asleep in the exam,” Harry said, panting heavily.

“How? Where?” Regulus asked, the words coming out even though he wasn’t sure he was consciously speaking. Sirius. He had Sirius. How did he have Sirius?

“I dunno how,” Harry replied urgently. “But I know where. There’s a room in the Department of Mysteries full of shelves covered in these little glass balls, and they’re at the end of row ninety-seven. He’s trying to use Sirius to get whatever it is he wants from there. He’s torturing him. He says he’ll end up killing him.” Harry’s voice was shaking, his knees trembling beneath him.

“The Department of Mysteries,” Regulus repeated. Why would Sirius have left Grimmauld? That’s the only reason that he could have been taken. Unless... Unless they were betrayed somehow. But he just talked to him a few days ago. He had no plans...

“How are we going to get there?” Harry asked, leaning against the stone wall and sliding down to the floor, his knees finally giving out.

“Get there?” Regulus said.

“We have to get to the Department of Mysteries, so we can rescue Sirius!”

“There is no we,” Regulus snapped. “You’re going to stay here.”

Harry was back on his feet in a split second. “I care about Sirius too! I’m not just going to sit here while you —”

“Harry! Stop yelling. Just let me think for a moment!”

Harry’s face turned red like he was going to start screaming again, but he took a breath and clenched his teeth together. He was breathing heavily through his nose like a dragon about to spit fire.

“How did he get into the Ministry of Magic without anyone realizing?” Regulus pondered softly, trying to force his brain to work through the panic and adrenaline that was sweeping through his body.

“How do I know?” Harry yelled.

“It’s the middle of the day,” Regulus said sharply. “It’s not like the place would be empty. There is no way that he just arrived there.”

Harry’s face paled. “Do you think it’s an old memory?” he breathed. “Do you think Sirius is already dead?”

Regulus felt like he might pass out for a second before he managed to get a grip on himself. “Here is what we’re going to do. You’re going to go up to the dorm and get the mirror. See if you can get in contact with Sirius.”

Harry looked like he might start arguing, but Regulus went on speaking over whatever he might say.

“I’m going to talk to Snape. He might have heard something from the Order, and he might have another way to check if Sirius is safe. Meet me back here right after. Do not do anything else, got it?” Regulus said firmly. He was nearly yelling by the time he finished speaking, and Harry looked a little shocked by it before he shook himself and nodded in understanding.

Harry sprinted up the stairs while Regulus headed in the opposite direction, walking down toward the dungeons to Snape’s office. He could only hope he was in there. His legs were shaking terribly, and though he felt disconnected from his body, he could tell that his nerve pain was getting worse as the anxiety spread.

Not Sirius. He couldn’t have Sirius. There was no way. Regulus refused to accept it. Sirius coming face to face with the Dark Lord was one of the worst possible outcomes that Regulus could imagine. Second only to the Dark Lord torturing Harry to death. There was no way. It couldn’t be real. But the other visions that Harry had, weren’t they all real? No! He interrupted his own train of thought. It couldn’t be. He couldn’t have Sirius.

He rapped quickly on Snape’s office door and breathed a quiet sigh of relief when he heard a soft, “Enter,” from within. He opened the door, moving swiftly to shut it behind him.

“Harry’s had a vision,” Regulus said before Snape could speak. “Do you have a way to get in touch with anyone at Grimmauld Place?”

Snape gave him a bewildered look for a moment before he covered it, his face settling back into one of disinterest. “What kind of vision?”

“The kind that involved Sirius about to be tortured to death,” Regulus snapped. Snape raised his eyebrows.

“I can try sending a Patronus, that is typically how we share information.” He spoke like Regulus was an idiot, and Regulus had to grind his teeth together to keep himself from saying something awful.

Of course, Regulus thought a moment later once the anger passed. Why hadn’t he realized? He knew that the Order used Patronuses to communicate, but he had been so thoughtless. Snape pulled out his wand, softly saying the incantation. A doe jumped from his wand, leaping around the room once before coming to stand before him.

“Go to Sirius Black. Tell him I need to know where he is. His godson has had a vision of his imminent torture,” Snape said blandly, speaking as if he was placing an order at a restaurant.

Something tugged at Regulus’s memory. *Did you know that she had a similar Patronus to me? Mine’s a stag, her’s was a doe. My mother said that meant we were soulmates.* James’s voice carried through his thoughts as if he was speaking directly into his ear.

“Really? A doe?” Regulus asked unhappily once Snape’s Patronus disappeared through the wall.

Snape merely raised one eyebrow in question. Regulus wanted to snarl at him, he wanted to say something unforgivably cruel. Instead, his words came out sad and mournful.

“Because of Lily?” he asked. A look of pain flashed across Snape’s face so quickly that Regulus nearly missed it. It was quickly replaced with one of disdain and frustration.

“It’s not what you think,” Snape said.

“You weren’t in love with her?” Regulus said, his voice only slightly sarcastic as he crossed his arms.

Snape guffawed. Regulus didn’t think he’d ever heard the man make a noise like that before. “I wasn’t *in love* with her,” Snape said snidely.

“Your Patronuses just happen to match?” Regulus asked.

“Didn’t they teach you anything about them in Defense Against the Dark Arts?”

“No,” Regulus said simply. He knew that Snape was just being annoying with this question. Most of the professors they had when they were both at Hogwarts were incompetent at best, and Umbridge was completely incapable of providing instruction. “But I know they can match when people are in love.”

“That’s not love, it’s obsession,” Snape replied.

“So you were obsessed with Lily Potter? What a shock,” Regulus replied.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Try to pay attention. Patronuses can match if one person becomes obsessed with another, to the point where their identity is lost in the midst of their worship of someone else, but they can match for other reasons. Take Potter’s. Do you think his Patronus is a stag just because he was obsessed with his father?”

Regulus paused for a second. He had forgotten that nearly the entire population of Hogwarts had seen Harry’s Patronus during the last Quidditch game of their third year. Snape didn’t know that it had changed, though Regulus doubted that almost anyone knew that outside of himself and the members of the DA.

“No, that would be ridiculous,” Regulus conceded.

“Exactly. He has his father’s Patronus because of the loss he endured. If I had to guess, I would think that he would grow out of that eventually. It probably will not be a stag his entire life. As he gets older, it will more than likely change.”

Regulus pondered that for a minute. He didn’t know much about Patronuses given that he hadn’t been able to cast one during his first life, but it made sense.

“So yours wasn’t always a doe?” Regulus asked.

Snape shook his head, looking away to stare at something Regulus couldn’t see. “No, it changed after Lily died.”

Regulus hummed. “So you weren’t in love with her?” It was probably a low blow, but the more time he spent as a Gryffindor, the less self-control he seemed to have.

“No,” Snape said simply. “We grew up together. She was like a sister to me.” Right after he spoke, the doe came back through the wall, walking in a small circle and stopping to stare right at Snape.

“What does that mean?” Regulus asked after a beat of silence.

“It wasn’t able to reach him,” Snape said.

“Why not?” Regulus said anxiously.

Snape shrugged. “He could be dead.” His eyes glittered dangerously, and Regulus was a second away from whipping out his wand. “Or Grimmauld could be unreachable by Patronus. It does have decades of wards on it. It’s possible. I never got around to asking Dumbledore, and I’ve never needed to send one there before.”

Regulus weighed his options. Sirius could already be dead. He shot that thought out of his head as fast as he could, not able to bear thinking about it. The wards at Grimmauld were complicated and dense, it was possible that Patronuses couldn’t get through.

“Do you have another way to contact them? The floo maybe?”

“Umbridge has restricted all floo access in the castle except for the one in her office,” Snape said, his voice sounding slightly bored. “I can send an owl.”

Regulus restrained himself from growling like an animal, turning and leaving the office. “Do that then!” he shouted. He would have to figure it out on his own.

He stalked back to the Great Hall where Harry was already pacing. “Were you able to contact him?” Harry shouted. Students were just beginning to leave the Hall, the exam period was finally over, and a few of them gave him odd looks as they passed.

“No,” Regulus said, shaking his head. “Were you?”

Harry’s face was full of terror, and it was all the answer Regulus needed. “He didn’t answer the mirror. We have to go. We have to go now!”

“What’s going on?” Hermione said, walking up to them, a worried look on her face. Ron was close behind, looking vaguely ill though Regulus wasn’t sure why. He wouldn’t make eye contact with any of them.

Harry stumbled over his words as he explained what he saw. Hermione presented the same question that Regulus had: how had the Dark Lord managed to get into the Ministry without anyone noticing? At least Ron was able to come up with another viable idea.

“If Umbridge has the only working floo, then we could break into her office and use it to contact the Order headquarters. Maybe Sirius just didn’t hear you calling for him,” Ron said.

Harry didn’t look happy about it, but Regulus agreed. They had to make sure that this wasn’t a trick before they went barreling into a trap set by the Dark Lord himself. Not to mention that Regulus still needed to figure out a way to keep Harry at Hogwarts so that he could go on his own.

The plan they came up with was simple. They needed a way to draw Umbridge’s attention away. Ron volunteered immediately. “See if Theo will help you,” Regulus said.

“Theo?” Ron asked incredulously.

“He was close with Fred and George, they might have left him something that can help cause a diversion.” Regulus wasn’t sure what made him say it — if it was the memories of Theo blowing up a new cauldron once a month since first year or the way Fred and George seemed to pull him away from DA lessons — but he ended up being right. Theo had a trunk full of terrible objects that he had helped Fred and George design.

They wrangled in Neville, Luna, and Ginny to help watch the door and the corridor around Umbridge’s classroom. Lavender and Parvati could tell they were up to something and insisted on being included. Regulus, too stressed about Sirius’s safety, wasn’t about to refuse them, so he sent them off with Ron and Theo to cause a diversion. He had to admit it, these kids worked quickly. Within half an hour, Umbridge was running off toward another part of the castle, and Harry, Regulus, and Hermione were inside her terribly decorated office.

“Watch the door,” Regulus said as he walked over to the fireplace, gathering a handful of Umbridge’s floo powder and tossing it into the fireplace. He stuck his head in the fire, the Grimmauld sitting room coming into view instantly. “Sirius. Sirius!”

There was no answer, nothing but eerie silence haunting the room. He swallowed down the bile that threatened to come up his throat. It was at that moment that he realized how stupid he was being. The simplest answer was right in front of him the entire time, why didn't he think of it?

"Kreacher!" he called. Kreacher appeared before him with a loud pop, standing in the center of the sitting room with a look of subdued surprise on his face.

"Yes, Master Regulus?" Kreacher asked. There was something odd happening with his voice that Regulus couldn't quite understand.

"Kreacher, where is Sirius?"

Kreacher paused for a second. "The dirty blood traitor is not here, Master Regulus."

"Not — not there? Where is he?"

Kreacher didn't answer, instead giving Regulus a silent look that Regulus didn't comprehend. He had made it a point to avoid commanding Kreacher whenever he could avoid it. Even in his first life when he knew nothing about all the terrible things Hermione rambled on about, he knew that forcing a house elf to do your bidding was demeaning. He never liked to do it, he always tried to treat Kreacher with respect. However, he'd never actually had Kreacher not answer him before. Something was wrong, and Regulus felt like he had no choice.

"Kreacher, tell me the truth," he commanded. "Where is Sirius?"

Kreacher paused for another second before speaking. "The blood traitor is on the roof."

"Of Grimmauld?"

"Yes," Kreacher answered unhappily.

"Why didn't he answer the mirror?"

"The blood traitor did not hear the calls coming from the mirror."

"What? Why didn't you tell him then?"

Kreacher just stared at him and something clicked in Regulus's head. Kreacher had done this on purpose. He had made sure that Sirius didn't hear the mirror on purpose. But why? He didn't get a chance to ask, because a second after he had this realization, a hand clenched in the back of his shirt and ripped him out of the fireplace. He turned to see the ugly, smug face of Dolores Umbridge staring down at him.

Chapter End Notes

also, i personally have never seen snape and lily's friendship as romantic, even on snape's part, so i wanted to elaborate on that here. this isn't defending the things he did, but just trying to expand on a character.

the trick.

Chapter Notes

cw: gore, murder, minor character death, maybe a passing mention to cannibalism (sort of)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Take his wand!” Umbridge barked. He heard shuffling in the room and felt someone slip his wand out of his cloak pocket. Umbridge grabbed Regulus by the hair, yanking on his strands hard to pull him to his feet. He let out a grunt of pain but swallowed the shout that threatened to follow. He didn't want her to know the pain she was causing him.

“I want to know why you are in my office,” she hissed, shaking her fist that was clutching his hair, he felt like she was ripping his hair out of his scalp and wondered distantly if he would end up with a bald spot because of her rough treatment.

“Let me go,” Regulus responded, scowling angrily.

“You had your head in my fire. With whom have you been communicating?” she said, tightening her hand even further.

Regulus remained silent, clenching his teeth together. No answer would be satisfactory to this woman, he could already tell. She threw him away from her, and he slammed into the desk. She was stronger than she looked, he thought. His hip hit the corner of the desk in the worst possible way causing his leg to buckle, and he fell to the ground harshly.

“Stop it!” Harry bellowed. Regulus looked over to see him being restrained by Draco who was easily overpowering him. He was taller than Harry, having grown significantly over the past year. Hermione was pressed up against the wall by Millicent Bulstrode.

There was a loud noise from right outside before the door swung open. Suddenly the room was very full. Ron, Ginny, Luna, Neville, Lavender, and Parvati were all forced inside by Crabbe, Goyle, and two older Slytherins, as well as Theo and Daphne. The latter two both looked equally panicked. Regulus had told them to go ahead and join Umbridge's squad so they could avoid suspicion from their housemates, and clearly, they were worried about the position they were now in.

“So, Black,” Umbridge said. “You stationed lookouts around my office, and you sent this buffoon to tell me —”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” Regulus drawled, ignoring the way Ron huffed in offense at the word she used to describe him.

Umbridge's face turned a horrible shade of pink. "Who were you speaking to?" she growled.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he sneered. Her face tightened frighteningly.

"Very well," she said in that sickly sweet voice she always used when she was about to physically hurt him. "Very well, Mr. Black. I offered you the chance to tell me freely. You refused. I have no alternative. Warrington, fetch Professor Snape."

Cassius Warrington was one of the seventh-year Slytherins in the room. Regulus barely knew anything about him, yet he threw a triumphant smirk at Regulus before leaving. Umbridge grabbed Regulus by the front of the shirt, dragging him to his feet and pushing him into the chair across from her desk. It was better than being on the floor, was all he thought.

After that, the silence in the room was thick. No one said a thing, all of them standing in a tense battle of wills. Umbridge was going to do something to him, he was sure of that, but at least Sirius was safe. Sirius was at home, distracted, but alive and not in the hands of the Dark Lord.

"You wanted to see me, Headmistress?" Snape said in that dull, empty voice he had perfected over the years.

She was requesting a bottle of Veritaserum, but Regulus wasn't listening. Snape was giving him a look that he was sure no one else in the room could interpret. He was asking for an update, even with the blasé way he acted earlier. Regulus gave the smallest shake of his head, hoping Snape would understand.

"A month?" Umbridge was yelling when Regulus tuned back into the conversation. "I have just found Black using my fire to communicate with a person or persons unknown!"

"Really? Well, it doesn't surprise me. Black has never shown much inclination to follow school rules."

Umbridge continued to argue with him, even putting him on probation when he refused to summon a bottle of Veritaserum out of thin air. Regulus would have felt a bit embarrassed for her if the situation wasn't so dire. He was probably about to be expelled, along with all the other teenagers that he'd roped into helping him.

"Very well," she said, her voice unsteady now, the sickly sweet tone gone now that Snape had left the room without helping her. "Very well... I am left with no alternative... This is an issue of Ministry security." She seemed to be talking to herself, her wand out and pointing right at Regulus who was staring her down as boldly as he could manage.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, almost nervous with the way she was moving. It reminded Regulus a bit of how Peter Pettigrew moved during their one confrontation in the Shrieking Shack. She beat her wand against her hand and started breathing heavily. Regulus felt goosebumps spread across his skin.

"You are forcing me, Black... I do not want to, but sometimes circumstances justify the use... I am sure the Minister will understand that I had no choice..."

Regulus wanted to ask what she was rambling on about, but he was too nervous to speak. He was pretty sure his shaky voice would ruin the unaffected air he was trying to present. He didn't like the way she seemed to be ramping up for something.

"The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue," she whispered.

"NO!" Harry shouted.

"No!" Hermione shrieked at the same time. "Professor Umbridge, it's illegal!"

Umbridge wasn't listening though, her face was spreading into something hungry. This wasn't the first time she would be casting dark magic. He was sure of it. He could practically smell it on her at that moment. She raised her wand even further, holding it like a knife pointed right between his eyes. His muscles tensed.

"The Minister wouldn't want you to break the law, Professor Umbridge!" Hermione cried. Harry was fighting roughly against Draco who looked openly worried by that point. He was holding Harry tightly though, keeping him from intervening.

"What Cornelius doesn't know won't hurt him," Umbridge replied. "He never knew I ordered dementors after Potter last summer, but he was delighted to be given the chance to expel him all the same..."

"You what?" Regulus snarled, lunging forward.

"Somebody had to act," Umbridge responded, pressing her wand into his forehead. She started rambling instantly about how she was the only one who had the gall to act when the rest of them were just complaining about Harry and his lies. Regulus didn't need to hear anymore.

She took a deep breath and Regulus prepared for the pain that he had become so familiar with. "*Cruc* —"

"NO!" Hermione shouted. "Regulus, we have to tell her."

Umbridge turned toward her so swiftly that her neck made an awful popping noise. Regulus looked at her incredulously. *Tell her what?* He tried to ask with just his eyes.

"Little Miss Question-All is going to give us some answers! Come on then, girl, come on!"

The others tried to interrupt her and even Regulus was trying to get her to stop talking. She couldn't tell Umbridge about Sirius, he wouldn't let him be put in even more danger. If Umbridge found out then she couldn't be allowed to leave this room again. Not with that knowledge. Regulus wasn't going to feel good about killing the woman in front of a crowd this big.

"We were trying to speak to Dumbledore," Hermione said, the words tumbling out. She was looking at Regulus as she said it, and he felt his body relax slightly. Of course, she wouldn't tell Umbridge about Sirius.

“Dumbledore? You know where Dumbledore is, then?”

“No, but —”

The two of them went back and forth, but Regulus was more focused on what Hermione was trying to do. It felt obvious to him that she was trying to trick Umbridge, but he just didn't understand how.

“We wanted to tell him that it's r-ready!” Hermione said, real tears in her eyes like she was betraying someone.

“What's ready, girl?” Umbridge replied, her entire body tensed like she was going to pounce at any second.

“The... the weapon.” Perhaps it was because he had spent so much time with Hermione, but he felt like he could hear the fake gravity with which she spoke. It was like she was performing on a stage rather than confessing a crime to a dangerous and unhinged Ministry employee.

That's what made it click for him. Fudge thought that Dumbledore was building an army. The DA, in a lot of ways, could have been the actualization of that exact worry for Fudge and Umbridge. If they had been discovered, it could have been proof of what they thought Dumbledore was trying to do. But that wasn't the only thing Umbridge suspected.

He thought about the night before when they were supposed to be taking their Astronomy O.W.L. Why would Umbridge want Hagrid in Auror custody rather than just off of Hogwarts grounds? Because she thought he was involved in Dumbledore's plan to build an army. He was though, wasn't he? Not intentionally, but he'd brought back a giant with him when he went to parlay with them. The weapon, as Hermione so graciously put it.

“I'll take you to it,” Regulus said. Umbridge gave him a searching look for a second then grinned.

“All right, let's make it just you and me... and we'll take Potter too, shall we?”

“No,” Regulus said.

“Professor. I think some of the squad should come with you to look after —”

“I am a fully qualified Ministry official,” Umbridge responded, turning to glance at Draco. She cut off abruptly as she looked back at Regulus again. She watched him warily for a moment. He understood why. He wasn't like the other students, or even like Harry, a simple liar if Fudge was to be believed. Regulus was an accused murderer. A Death Eater had died in his presence. “Very well, Malfoy. You and I will go with Black to see the weapon.”

“No,” Harry said. He tried to say something else but was interrupted by the Stunning Spell Umbridge flung at him. Regulus consciously didn't flinch, but a slither of anger zipped up his spine. He swallowed it down. He had to hold it together, at least for now.

The others were left in the care of the other Inquisitorial Squad members. Hermione and Ron watched him unsteadily, but he trusted that they wouldn't be harmed with Umbridge out of the room. He would revive Harry when they got back and tell him that Sirius was safe.

Regulus led the way in front of the two of them. They passed through the entrance hall where the loud sounds of students having dinner in the Great Hall echoed. He felt so disconnected from them, so otherworldly. Already his thoughts were drifting away from his life as a Hogwarts student.

"It's hidden in Hagrid's hut, is it?" Umbridge asked excitedly once they made it outside, but Regulus only smirked, looking over his shoulder to shake his head at her. "Then where is it?"

"In the Forbidden Forest. Where else?" Regulus said. Not stopping for a second to hear her response, stomping directly into the forest. He didn't know where Grawp was exactly, not that it mattered. He wasn't taking Umbridge there.

"Is it very far in?" Umbridge asked.

"It would have to be to be hidden from you," Draco responded, his voice shaking slightly. Regulus knew he was afraid of the forest, had been since first year, but he was clearly trying very hard to hold it in.

Regulus walked swiftly, ignoring the way pain shot down his back and legs, listening as Umbridge stumbled behind him, taking a few jogging steps now and then to try and keep up with his long strides. He must have walked for a full twenty minutes before he paused, slowing to a stroll and then stopping completely.

"Well?" Umbridge demanded as he slowly turned to look at her. Draco was behind her, watching Regulus with an expression of curiosity. Regulus stared her down. She was pointing her wand at him. Her wand posed a danger, but he was sure he could be faster. He would have to be faster.

There were sounds distantly in the forest of other creatures and threats, but he couldn't make them out clearly. They were muffled by the thick trees and the way his thoughts began to swirl like an unending storm. He tilted his head slightly, thinking about the scar etched into the back of his hand. *I will make the right choices*. What words would have been carved into Harry's hand had she gotten her claws into him?

He thought about the dementors. Did she know he could cast a Patronus? Or was she prepared to kill him? Did she want him soulless before the school year even began? The thought made rage overtake the last few logical thoughts he had stuck in his head. They faded away into a place he couldn't access.

"Where is it?" Umbridge screeched. Draco jumped at the noise, but Regulus didn't even react.

He stared down the woman who had worked so hard to hurt Harry, one of the only people in the world that Regulus would kill or die for. He had decided long ago that he would not let

her get away with it, though he had originally been planning to let the Defense Against the Dark Arts position curse take care of her.

Now he realized that this time the curse would play out through him. He thought of Ron's repeated dream. *I keep having dreams about Umbridge in the forest with a giant beast. Does it kill her? Sometimes it does. Sometimes she kills it.* Only one of them, either he or Umbridge, was leaving the forest alive, and he had no plans to die that day.

She already thought he was a murderer. He may as well prove her right.

"You tricked me, didn't you?" Umbridge hissed.

"I did," Regulus responded simply. A second later he was sinking into his animagus form. She hit him with a spell, but it did very little on the bear's body that overtook his own.

He was only a few short strides away, and before Umbridge could mouth another spell, a large paw was swiping at her. His nails scratched along her arm, half removing her hand from the end. She let out a truly terrorized scream, a noise that did nothing but spur him on. It was music to his ears, a delicate noise that healed something inside him.

She barely had a moment to turn to run before he was on her. He pushed her to the ground with one large paw between her shoulders, his nails digging through her pink robes and into her flesh. The smell of blood filled his nostrils.

He was vaguely aware of Draco near them. Regulus expected him to run, but instead, Draco backed up into a tree and slid heavily to the ground, watching with wide, terror-filled eyes.

Regulus dug his teeth into her neck, and with no preamble, crunched the delicate bones beneath his powerful jaw. Her screaming broke off abruptly, leaving only a hollow silence behind. A sick sense of satisfaction blanketed his sharp and painful feelings.

Blood spilled from the gashes in her skin, the smell thick in his nostrils. He nosed at it gently, his thoughts locked so deeply within him that he felt nothing but hunger roll in his stomach. He hadn't eaten much lunch that day.

"Regulus!" Draco hissed. Regulus looked over at him. He was still next to the tree, but he looked weird. His eyes seemed to glow in the shadows like torches were shining out of them, and his face had taken on an unnaturally sharp quality. In addition to that, he was giving off the most particular smell. He couldn't understand it, but it was almost sickly sweet like poison mixed into jam.

Regulus shook his head hard. He had to work to feel himself again. He paced in a circle, moving away from the body to clear his nostrils, and when he finally felt clear-headed, he transformed back into himself.

"You killed her," Draco whispered, his voice sounding odd and metallic. Regulus nodded.

"Yes," Regulus said flatly. Draco stared up at him from his place on the forest floor. He still looked off, inhuman, but his features were settling as the minutes passed.

He glanced back at Umbridge's corpse. He couldn't let anyone come looking for her, but he needed to get back to Harry and the others. Without speaking, he used magic to dig into the ground, brushing her mauled body into the hole and covering it with dirt, before he turned back to Draco.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said to Draco, trying to speak gently.

"You killed her," Draco repeated. Regulus realized that he couldn't leave Draco like this. He would never be the same, he would walk out of the woods a changed man, and Regulus would be caught within an hour. He raised his wand, and Draco hissed loudly. The hairs raised on the back of Regulus's neck, but he tried not to let it affect him too much, focusing more on the spell he needed to cast.

"*Obliviate*," he whispered, carefully removing his memories of Umbridge's death, replacing them subtly with the fearful thoughts of what the creatures of the forest might do to him. He also removed any memories of his animagus form. That wasn't a secret he wanted to get out.

Now if anyone asked, he would think that Umbridge left them in the forest to go looking for the weapon Regulus mentioned, leaving them right inside the trees. They'd barely taken two steps into the forest before she was gone. It was a dangerous place. Anything could have happened to her here.

"Come on," he said, holding out a hand to help Draco up. Draco took it in a daze. He didn't drop it when they stood, instead holding it tightly as Regulus led them out of the forest. It reminded Regulus of a small child still terrified of what was hidden in the dark. He didn't remember what he needed to be afraid of, unaware that Regulus was the real danger here.

It wasn't until they were halfway up to the castle that Draco dropped his hand. Regulus looked at him out of the corner of his eye and could see the faint look of embarrassment on his face.

"I can't believe you tricked her like that," Draco said faintly. "Do you think she'll find her way back out?"

"I have no idea," Regulus responded. "I'm sure she will though. She's an adult, she can take care of herself."

Draco nodded in acceptance. "What were you doing in her office anyway?"

"Trying to talk to Sirius. I needed to check in with him and could only do it through the floo."

"You should have told me," Draco said petulantly. "I could have helped you."

"Why would you help me talk to Sirius?" Regulus asked. Draco shrugged but didn't answer. The look of embarrassment was back on his face.

They walked in silence the rest of the way to Umbridge's office, but when they approached they saw Theo talking softly to Lavender and Parvati.

“You’re back,” Theo said blandly.

“What’s happening? Why are you out here?” Regulus asked.

“What is he doing with you?” Lavender asked snidely, glaring at Draco.

“He helped me trick Umbridge,” Regulus said. Draco gasped, sounding vaguely offended, but didn’t argue. “Where are the others?”

“They left,” Parvati said.

Regulus froze. “They what?”

“We managed to trick the others into eating some of the Puking Pastilles that the twins left behind,” Theo said. “Then Hermione revived Harry and the rest of them left through the floo.”

“Where did they go?” Draco asked, his voice taking on that odd metallic quality again. Lavender and Parvati shared a look, but Theo just gave Draco an appraising look.

“Harry said they had to get to the Ministry. He wanted us to tell you, we were about to go looking for you,” Lavender said faintly.

Regulus’s heart pounded in his chest, the sound echoing loudly in his ears. The Ministry, he thought distantly. Harry didn’t know, he didn’t have time to tell Harry that Sirius was safe. He went to the Ministry. He took the others. Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny. All of them had just walked into a Death Eater trap. Right into the Dark Lord’s hands.

Chapter End Notes

back in july, i made a post on my tumblr saying that two characters who didn't die in canon would be murdered in cold blood in this fic. anyway, here was one of them :)

the veil.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Go get Snape now,” Regulus said to Draco, but Theo, Lavender, and Parvati were listening closely like they were about to jump into action.

“Snape?” Theo asked.

“Tell him that Harry and the others have gone to the Department of Mysteries. Tell him to get the Order and meet me there.”

“What’s happening? Why did they go to the Ministry?” Draco interrupted to ask.

“It’s complicated, but Harry just walked into a trap set by Death Eaters. They are all in danger.” Regulus spoke quickly, his heart racing in his chest.

“What are you going to do?” Draco asked.

“I’m going to follow them,” he said, rushing past into Umbridge’s office. It was deadly silent, even the fire having gone out after the others traveled to the Ministry. He couldn’t believe this. Harry had gone through without talking to him. He had put all of his friends in danger because he couldn’t wait for Regulus to get back.

He was so mad that he started pulling at the ends of his hair with one hand, grabbing floo powder with the other to toss into the fireplace. He jumped in, shouting, “The Ministry,” before disappearing from the office.

The swirling travel of the floo was a perfect representation of how he felt at that moment. He had just killed a woman. Not even provoked, she was just pointing a wand at him, and he mauled her to death. He snapped her neck without a second thought. Worse than that, he almost let his animal instincts take over. He was disgusted with himself. Ashamed. But not guilty, he realized. He knew Umbridge had to go. He wouldn’t feel bad about that.

He arrived at the empty entrance hall of the Ministry. It was late enough in the day now that most employees would already be home. How long had he been in the forest? It couldn’t have been more than an hour. He hadn’t even thought to check.

He thought about calling Kreacher, telling him what was going on, but decided against it. For one, he didn’t want Sirius in harm’s way, and there was no way that he wouldn’t come along if Kreacher was informed. He could only hope that Snape and the other Order members could convince him to stay back. It wouldn’t do to have a wanted criminal storm the Ministry.

More than that though, he couldn’t get the feeling of betrayal out of his bloodstream when thinking about Kreacher. Why had he lied to him? He’d never done that before. Kreacher had

been his most trusted friend at the end of his first life and the beginning of his second. Why would he do this to him?

He thought about the push for house elf freedom that Hermione was always talking about. Was that why? Had he been mistreating Kreacher this entire time? Careless to his own actions and the way they affect others? The guilt that was missing from Umbridge's murder now reared its ugly head thinking about Kreacher being hurt for something he had done.

Although, Kreacher had always hated Sirius. It was possible that this wasn't aimed at Regulus at all, but surely he knew that Sirius was important. After Sirius left home, Regulus cried every night for the rest of the summer. He had sent Sirius away, sparing him from the end of their mother's wand, but Sirius had abandoned him long before that and that night was just the final nail in the coffin. Now he had Sirius back against all odds, it wasn't perfect, and there was distance there that felt insurmountable, but surely Kreacher knew how much Regulus cared about Sirius. Didn't he?

He was halfway to the main atrium when the floo flared up behind him. He turned just in time to see Draco stumble out.

"What do you think you're doing?" Regulus asked, turning fully to look at him. Draco brushed the ash off his clothes.

"I'm coming with you," Draco said.

"No, you're not," Regulus responded. "You're supposed to be getting Snape!"

"Theo is going to get him, don't worry."

"Draco, you can't be here. Didn't you hear what I said? This isn't just the Ministry. Harry was lured here by the Dark Lord himself. It's going to be crawling with Death Eaters."

"I know," Draco said.

"Clearly, you don't," Regulus said frustratedly. "Your father is likely here, Draco. Do you not understand that?"

Draco swallowed harshly, his face growing pale. "I'm not leaving you here. I'm coming to help you."

Regulus growled in frustration. "Why are you doing this? Don't you think I have enough to deal with given all the other teenagers here I need to rescue?"

"Exactly! I can help you do that," Draco argued impatiently, and wasn't that funny, that Draco should be the one feeling impatient by this conversation.

"And when everyone sees you helping me? When Harry sees it?"

"I'll stay out of sight," Draco offered. Regulus had never hit a child, but he was heavily considering throwing a punch right at that moment.

“Draco, if the Death Eaters discover you helping Harry Potter, it will not end well for you. Or your parents.”

Draco gave him a panicked look but then shook his head. “We’re wasting time.” He walked past him quickly, nearly sprinting toward the lifts, and Regulus had no choice but to follow.

No security person was waiting to check their wands. An ominous sign that confirmed what Regulus already knew. This was a trap, and he was walking right into it. A lift arrived immediately, all of them out of use now that the Ministry was empty. “Where are we going?”

“The Department of Mysteries,” Regulus whispered as they entered. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt like he had to stay quiet now as if they were being listened to by someone they couldn’t see. He pressed the button for level nine. He’d never been to the Department of Mysteries himself, but he knew where it was.

“Why are they in the Department of Mysteries?” Draco whispered.

“I don’t know,” Regulus said. “Just stay close to me.”

The lift arrived at the floor with a pleasant female voice announcing, “Department of Mysteries.” It took Regulus a second to start moving, his muscles cramping up with fear. The Dark Lord could be here already. He could already have Harry. Regulus didn’t know if he was ready to face him again, but he had no choice.

They walked the long corridor that led to the Department of Mysteries door. It felt too easy walking right in. There should have been someone there to stop them, even if it was an enemy, someone should have been there. They walked through the door and ended up in a large circular room with about a dozen doors. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all pitch black, the only light a few lanterns between the doors.

The door slammed behind them as they took in the room. There were two doors with large red X’s etched in them.

“Do you think they went through them?” Draco whispered.

“I don’t know,” Regulus said honestly. “Maybe they decided those doors weren’t any good. No one knows what’s inside the Department of Mysteries. There could be any number of dangers behind those doors.”

“What do we do then?”

“Just let me think for a second.” The two doors were next to each other, so there was always the option that they tried the next one in the row, and that had been the correct door, that could be why they didn’t mark it. That narrowed it down to two possible options, one door on either side.

Before he could get too turned around, he shifted and used a spell to etch the letter E in the door they came through, in case they needed to make a quick getaway. The moment the spell

was out of his wand, another random door slid open slowly. He looked at Draco who was already watching him, his eyebrows raised in trepidation.

He walked through the doorway slowly, but inside it was just a moderately sized office. It was another circular room with a singular desk in the center. There was next to nothing else in the office though, only a handful of books on the desk. There were no decorations on the walls and no other furniture beyond a very old and worn chair behind the desk.

Draco walked slowly to the desk, picking up one of the books carefully before dropping it with a loud clatter. He was staring at it like it burned him.

“Don’t touch anything,” Regulus said. “They’re not in here, I think we should try another door.”

“What do you think this does?” Draco replied.

“Draco, don’t!” Regulus yelled, but Draco was already touching whatever he had found on the desk. “What did I just say?!” Instantly the walls began to shift. Regulus raised his wand, but no attack came. Instead, the doors faded and then disappeared entirely. They were now surrounded by what looked like the depths of the Forbidden Forest.

“What is this place?” Draco breathed.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we should be in here.”

Suddenly, something moved between the dense, dark trees. Regulus shot off a spell without thinking, but it hit an invisible wall and dissipated instantly. They weren’t really in the forest, it was some kind of illusion, almost like it was a large window. Although, Regulus was pretty sure that if he walked forward, he could pass right through it and stumble into the indoor forest.

“My father has a desk just like this,” Draco mumbled. Regulus looked over at him just in time to watch him touch yet another part of the desk.

“Stop doing that!” Regulus yelled. He realized a second after Draco pulled his hand away that Orion also had a desk similar to it. He remembered when he was very little he used to sneak into his father’s study when he wasn’t home, just for the pure childish instinct to explore.

Once he and Sirius snuck in when Sirius told him about a Chimera skull that their father supposedly kept on the top ledge of his bookshelf.

“No, he doesn’t. You’re making that up,” Regulus said snidely.

“Wanna bet?” Sirius responded, crossing his arms confidently.

Regulus eyed him carefully. “Prove it.”

“Come on then,” Sirius said triumphantly. Once they were in the empty office, Sirius pointed to something at the highest point in the room. Regulus couldn’t tell what it was from his

place on the ground. “Still don’t believe me?”

“It just looks like a statue,” Regulus said uncertainly. Sirius huffed and started climbing up the bookshelf like it was a ladder. “Sirius,” Regulus hissed. “Get down!”

“I’ve almost got it,” Sirius responded.

“Sirius!” Regulus said again. Their father was supposed to be at the Ministry all day, but he must have forgotten something because a second later he opened his study door. Regulus looked over with a gasp.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Orion bellowed. Sirius jolted in surprise and lost his grip on the bookshelf, falling heavily to the desk below. He had something in his hand when he fell, a glass figurine, and it slipped out of his grip, making a large notch in the wood of the desk, before it fell to the floor and shattered.

He and Sirius were both punished for that mishap and then lectured for hours about the importance of Orion’s desk. It had been in the family for decades and would outstay both of them. It was the kind of object made exclusively for the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. The woodworker only created a handful, all of them gifted to members of the Black family. It just looked like a desk to young Regulus, but now as he thought back to it, it was rather unique.

It was made of a deep dark wood that seemed to swallow light. The legs were carved to look like human bones intertwined with the tentacles of a squid. It used to freak him out when he was a kid. Looking at the identical one in the Department office felt uncanny and unreal. No one knew who worked in the Department of Mysteries. You could be talking to Unspeakable and never realize it. So a member of his family might have ended up here, but it seemed odd to him.

“Woah,” Draco said, pulling Regulus from his memories. As he watched, the thick wooden desk shifted, and after a second, began to split down the middle.

“What did you do?” Regulus whispered frantically.

“On my father’s desk, there’s a way to reveal a secret compartment by turning a few of the knobs. I was just curious.” The split desk ends began to move apart.

“How does Lucius have one of the desks?” Regulus asked, watching the desk uneasily.

“It was a wedding gift,” Draco said.

Once the two sides of the desk stopped moving, the floor beneath them vanished and a small circular staircase appeared on the floor leading to the level below. Dull lights lit the way, but it was impossible to see where the staircase ended from their viewpoint in the office.

“What do you suppose is down there?” Draco asked.

“I don’t think we should find out,” Regulus responded.

“You’re not curious? Why did the door open when you used magic? I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“And if it’s a trap?”

“Isn’t it all a trap?” Draco said faintly. Regulus was going to argue with him or maybe drag him out of the room, but Draco was quick, quicker than Regulus no doubt, and before he could respond, Draco was heading swiftly down the stairs into the unknown. Regulus had no choice but to follow him.

It took less than a minute to reach the bottom, the floor below must have been shielded with a spell to keep it from being visible, but it wasn’t actually that deep. It looked like another office, nearly identical to the one above them except this one had a standard desk. It was also filled to the brim with books and jars full of odd liquids and animal body parts.

“What are they studying down here?” Regulus asked, speaking more to himself than anything.

Draco answered him anyway. “Magical creatures.” Regulus gave him a questioning look, but Draco had his back to him and did not elaborate.

There was one door in the room in the exact place the door was in the original office. However, when Regulus walked toward it, it vanished into thin air. In its place was a wide archway that led into a dimly lit corridor. He poked his head in, confused by what he was seeing. The corridor went on for farther than he could see in the shadows, but every few feet on either side of the hallway there were large alcoves carved into the walls. He was trying to figure out why they looked strange to him when a loud banging drew his attention.

In the alcove closest to him was an old man dressed in a gray shirt and trousers. He was banging against nothing, but every time his palms reached a certain point they would flatten against something. It was another one of the sudo-windows like in the office above, Regulus realized. But what was this man doing here? He couldn’t see into the other alcoves from where he stood, as they were carved too deeply into the walls, but he wondered if there were other people in each of them.

In the alcove with the man that Regulus could see there was a pile of blankets on the floor, and in the darkest corner, there was a toilet low to the ground. It was a prison cell, Regulus realized. Why did the Department of Mysteries have its own prison?

“Regulus, come look at this!” Draco shouted. The old man tried to yell something at him, but Regulus couldn’t make out what he was saying. It didn’t matter though. Regulus couldn’t help him. Not right now anyway.

He gave him what he hoped was an apologetic look and turned back to see Draco gesturing toward something on the wall. It looked like a piece of art, but as he looked closer, he realized it was a bird’s eye view of a building.

“Look!” Draco said impatiently, pointing to something moving swiftly down the piece of artwork. Regulus gasped.

“Harry,” he said. He realized then what it was. It was a model of the Department of Mysteries. He couldn’t see the room they were in, but he could see the empty office above them. Surrounding it was a semicircle of pitch darkness, what was no doubt the forest they had seen earlier. There were long corridors shooting off from the circular room that they first entered through. At the very top, there was a huge room with long isles, many of them actively crashing into each other as they watched. On the far left was a black chamber with rock seating all facing an empty arch.

As he watched, a tiny Harry, Hermione, and Neville ran down a hallway away from the room full of crashing objects toward the circular room as a group of masked figures chased them. A few masked figures littered the parallel hallways. On the other side, he could see Ron, Ginny, and Luna in another room with what looked like small replicas of planets. They were also being chased by two more masked figures, all of them being led to the circular entry room.

“Come on!” Regulus shouted. They both barreled up the staircase, Regulus’s legs aching beneath him. The walls of the office above had reset while they were gone, blocking the indoor forest from view. He rushed through the door, but the others weren’t there. One of the doors with the red X on it was open and three Death Eaters were in the process of running through it. They must have been chasing the others.

Two of the Death Eaters made it through, but the last one turned just in time to see them. Draco and Regulus both let out shouts of surprise. It wasn’t just any Death Eater. Beneath the dark hood that hid his bright blonde hair was Draco’s father looking dumbfounded.

The look of horriification on Lucius Malfoy’s face faded quickly into a rage as he pointed his wand at them. The door behind him slammed shut, leaving the three of them alone.

“Draco, what are you doing here?” he hissed angrily. Draco was a statue next to him, frozen in place now that he was face to face with his Death Eater father.

It didn’t escape Regulus’s notice that Harry and the others were now being chased into a room with an entire hoard of Death Eaters. Regulus didn’t have time to listen to Draco and Lucius have it out. He had to get to Harry and get the rest of them out of here.

“*Stupefy*.” Regulus hoped to take him by surprise, but Lucius wouldn’t be easily beaten. He threw back three non-verbal spells in quick succession. Draco was shouting in surprise, suddenly throwing up a shield between them. Regulus turned and impulsively ran through one of the unmarked doors, the one right next to the exit.

He should have looked at the model of the Department a little closer when he had the chance. He could tell from a quick glance that all the rooms were connected, but he couldn’t remember how exactly. The room he entered was oddly decorated with deep red and pink wallpaper. It reminded him a bit of Umbridge’s office, but much darker. There was a desk on one wall, though it was too tall to sit at.

On the other side was a nook bed built right into the wall. The bedding looked almost Victorian, for what reason, he had no idea. He sprinted through an archway next to it and into a room that looked like the prefect’s bathroom at Hogwarts. It was a moderately long room

with a huge bathtub in the center built into the floor. In the tub was a pink potion that had thick tufts of steam lifting off of it.

“*Incarcerous*,” he heard Lucius yell behind him, and he ducked to the side instinctively, running around the large tub to make it to a door that sat on the far side of the room.

He was breathing heavily as he ran, inhaling an intoxicatingly seductive scent. He wasn’t sure how to explain it, almost like freshly cut wood mixed with the sharp smell of a campfire. There was something else beneath it, a musk that brought something embarrassingly pleasant to his thoughts. He sprinted through the door and out of the room before it could drown him.

The next room was brightly lit, but almost completely empty. Despite the large area with its high ceilings, the only thing inside was a black cloud contained in a huge jar. As he moved past it, the cloud seemed to react to his juxtaposition and began violently jerking around like it was trying to stab him.

A spell went whizzing past his head, and he tried to move even further away from it, but a second later another hit him squarely in the shoulder. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he felt blood soak his cloak, and he cried out in pain. He was almost to the next door, but he had no choice but to turn and fight.

Draco hadn’t made it into the room yet — if he was even still following them — so nothing was stopping him from attacking Lucius full-on. He began throwing out every spell he could think of, stopping to block or dodge the non-verbal curses Lucius was returning with. Not once did Lucius try to kill him though, which Regulus found interesting. He guessed the act of murder was just a tad too far for Lucius. He had always been a bit soft, at least that’s what his mother used to say.

Unfortunately, the two of them were equally matched, and unless Regulus was prepared to take this fight to a more lethal level or turn into a bear and maul a second person to death today, he wasn’t sure that he was going to win given the way his magical core was already weakened. Just as he felt his magic faltering, Draco ran through the door behind Lucius.

“Stop!” Draco yelled. It was just enough to distract Lucius, and Regulus was able to hit him with a spell to knock him out cold. He fell heavily to the ground, and Draco quickly knelt next to him. “What did you do?” he demanded.

“He’s just knocked out. We have to get to the others,” Regulus said, already turning away. Draco didn’t move. “Draco.”

“I can’t just leave him here,” Draco said. “If the Order is coming then they might hurt him.”

Regulus paused for a moment. “Then leave and take him with you.” He said the words angrily, practically spat them out, and Draco flinched slightly. He didn’t have any time to evaluate the choice Draco was making, deciding at the last second to escape from the Ministry with his father rather than continuing to help Regulus.

Lucius would now know without a shadow of a doubt that Draco had been helping Regulus and in turn Harry and the Order. What would his father do to him when he had time to

comprehend that betrayal? What would the Dark Lord think when he found out? He didn't have time to think about it. Once Harry and the others were safe, he would bring it up to Dumbledore. They would have to do something to help Draco.

The next door led him through a slim hallway, but he recognized the room at the very end of it. There was a large bowl full of human brains swimming in some unknown liquid. He gagged slightly and looked around the room to see an unconscious Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna. Only Harry and Neville were missing.

“*Enervate*,” he cast at Hermione who was closest to him. She woke with a groan.

“Regulus?”

“You need to get the others and get out. Where is Harry?”

She looked at him confusedly for a moment. “I don't know,” she said. “Regulus, it was a trap. Sirius wasn't here at all.” Her eyes filled with tears.

He knelt next to her, placing a gentle hand against her cheek. “It's okay. I'm going to get the rest of them out. Can you deal with those three?” He gestured to Ron, Ginny, and Luna.

“Yeah, yes,” she said, already climbing to her feet. He helped her stand, waiting just a moment to make sure she was steady before he sprinted through one of the many doors on the other side of the room. The moment he was through the door, he recognized the black chamber with the empty arch. The room wasn't empty though, all around him there was fighting.

He was at the top of the room, facing the arch in the center. To his left were the unconscious or dead bodies of two masked Death Eaters. Moody was also knocked out on the ground only a few feet from the arch. What drew his eyes first though was Tonks and Bellatrix locked in a fierce and deadly duel.

Right in front of the arch was Sirius — of course, Sirius. He couldn't just stay home, could he? Regulus's stomach twisted. Sirius was fighting Dolohov, one of the Death Eaters who had recently escaped Azkaban. To the right of the arch, Avery — one of Snape's old friends — and MacNair were lying still against the rocks.

He also spotted Kingsley in the process of knocking out a Death Eater and entering a duel with another one. Lupin was there fighting Theo's father, his mask cracked in half to reveal his face. And finally, closest to the door that led to the circular entrance room were Harry and Neville running at a full sprint, looking terrified.

Regulus barely had a second to look at them before he heard Tonks shout in distress. She was knocked back roughly against the rocks. Without thinking about it, Regulus threw a spell to draw Bellatrix's attention. He had never dueled Bellatrix, even when they were on the same side. He was always terrified of her, and that hadn't changed even after all the years apart.

She turned to him with a look of insanity that he couldn't even hope to comprehend. Her eyes glinted with madness so deep that Regulus could get lost in it. Fighting her wasn't like

fighting Lucius. Even before Azkaban, she had been unreasonably skilled at magic. It seemed to flow out of her with every flick of her fingers.

It barely took two seconds for her to disarm him, following it up with a spell that glowed bright red, hitting him in the arm. He fell to his knees as pain seared up from where the spell had connected with his body. He was sure she was about to hit him with something else, but her attention was drawn away by Sirius who had successfully won his fight with Dolohov.

Regulus was climbing to his feet a moment later when Dumbledore entered the room through the door Harry and Neville were heading towards, his face stormy with anger. The other fights seemed to fall to silence as everyone took in his arrival, as if the Death Eaters already knew all was lost now that he was here. The only two left dueling were Sirius and Bellatrix, caught in a fight that had been building for years and years.

Sirius ducked one of Bellatrix's curses, the same red light that had hit Regulus a second earlier. Regulus started moving toward them.

"Come on, you can do better than that!" he yelled at her. Stupid. He was so stupid. Why did he have to taunt the woman? Her second curse hit him square in the chest and Regulus, wandless and helpless, was sprinting before he could give it a second thought.

Sirius was falling, the laughter dying on his face as it was covered in shock and pain. He was falling. That was all Regulus could think as he approached him. He didn't know what the arch was, but he knew, down into his very bones, that if Sirius fell through it he wouldn't be coming back.

His heel crossed into the arch just as Regulus reached him. He meant to pull him, but he was approaching from the side. It was a weird angle and there was no time. He turned slightly and used all his body weight to knock Sirius sideways. Their shoulders knocked together as Sirius's trajectory changed, his heel pulling out of the arch as he fell to the side.

It was a weird angle, he thought again vaguely. That's all it was. He couldn't pull him. He had used all his strength to move this way, and he couldn't stop it now. His shoulder hit the side of the arch roughly and, as if in slow motion, he slipped backward. A wash of cold overtook him as he fell.

The last thing he saw was Harry's horrified face screaming his name.

Chapter End Notes

oops

the acquittal.

Thirteen days. That's how long it took to exonerate Sirius. Thirteen days. That was all.

Remus had spent months cozying up to Dora trying to work on Sirius's case. He knew there was more there, that the original Aurors and powers that be didn't investigate, especially given the fact that he didn't have a trial, yet it was nearly impossible to get anyone to look into it. Even in the Order, where people had been assured many times that Sirius was innocent, and had even interacted with him since he escaped Azkaban, they weren't interested in pursuing his freedom.

Even Sirius didn't seem to care, the way he sunk into depression in Grimmauld, a demoralized attitude taking over every thought in his head, he seemed beyond caring about his own potential freedom from the Ministry and the dementor's kiss sentence that awaited him if he was caught by the wrong people. He called it a Sisyphean task, the prospect of pursuing freedom, speaking in that dismissive, haughty way that reminded Remus of a much younger, yet equally damaged, version of Sirius.

So Remus was on his own trying to prove Sirius's innocence, and he had very few allies among the other Order members. Most of the Aurors in the Order weren't keen on risking their careers or reputations on something that didn't feel pressing. A few were even a little fearful of it when Remus brought it up to them, though he wasn't sure if it was a prejudice against werewolves since he was the one who was asking or a general dislike of the Black family tree that brought that specific emotion about.

Hence his involvement with Dora. She was very young, very friendly, and perhaps, yes, a tad easily manipulated. Not that Remus was trying to do anything untoward with her, but he wasn't exactly being a very nice man either. He knew, distantly, that Dora saw him as more than just another friendly face at the Order meetings, but he hadn't considered being involved with someone romantically in a long time, and if Dora's harmless crush on him would help gain Sirius his freedom, then so be it.

Of course, this had a terrible effect on Sirius himself. Remus spent many sleepless nights going back and forth on whether he should just cave and tell Sirius what he was doing, but in the end, he couldn't bring himself to do it. He enjoyed his friendship with Dora and found comfort in her company, both facts that he didn't think Sirius would like to hear about. More than that, he didn't want to tell Sirius anything until he had some kind of concrete news, a new trial or even a reopened case, something. None of those things came to pass though.

After Regulus fell through the veil, a look of nightmarish surprise on his face, Sirius hit the ground with a deadening thump. Remus had no idea if he was dead or alive, the spell Bellatrix hit him with knocked him out cold, but it didn't matter at that moment. Harry, having just witnessed Regulus die, was in the process of trying to follow him to the grave.

Remus grabbed him around the chest, dragging him away from the archway.

"REGULUS!" Harry screamed, fighting against Remus's arms. "REGULUS!"

“There’s nothing you can do, Harry —”

“Get him, save him, he’s only just gone through!”

“It’s too late, Harry —”

“We can still reach him —”

Listening to Harry call out for Regulus was one of the worst sounds Remus had ever heard. The anguish and disbelief made Remus feel dizzy with his own grief. He didn’t know Regulus well, and Regulus’s loyalty always lay clearly with Sirius and Harry, but now he felt sick with regret that he never got to know the boy Harry so obviously loved. He had risked a lot to keep Harry safe and regardless of whether that was tied to James was irrelevant, especially now that he was gone.

Harry ran off chasing Bellatrix a moment later, and Dumbledore followed him, but Remus rushed back to Sirius, still lying unconscious on the ground next to the whispering veil, the voices like a siren call.

“Sirius,” he hissed, but Sirius was cold and still. He had a pulse, though it was weak, but he wouldn’t wake. Remus cast every healing spell he could think of and was in the middle of tearing open his shirt to see the place where Bellatrix’s spell hit him when an Auror he didn’t know stormed into the room.

Remus was arrested, as was Sirius, though he was still unconscious, and Remus had to witness as they took his body away, whatever possible future he and Sirius had slipped through his fingers. He curled up into a ball once inside the holding cell deep in the bowels of the Ministry, expecting to spend weeks or even months there before possibly being moved to Azkaban, but he was let go within a matter of days.

“Fudge finally saw Voldemort in the flesh,” Dumbledore said grimly. “I was able to vouch for your release.”

“Where is Sirius?” Remus said, the words spilling from his mouth like they had been waiting on his tongue.

“They still have him,” Dumbledore said. “Kingsley is working on getting a healer in, but they won’t allow him to be taken to St. Mungo’s given his status.”

“His status?” Remus asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Right now, they are operating under the assumption that he was here with the other Death Eaters.”

“How many of them were arrested?”

“Eleven, I believe,” Dumbledore replied. “Bellatrix escaped with Voldemort. Harry mentioned that Lucius was here as well, but he wasn’t seen by any of us nor was he arrested.” The lift doors opened into the Ministry atrium, and he followed Dumbledore into the mostly empty area.

“How is Harry?” Remus asked gravely.

“He is struggling,” Dumbledore responded with unusual honesty. “He cared very much for Regulus, and I believe he feels that it is his fault that Regulus is dead.” Remus frowned, he could imagine how Harry would be dealing with this news, especially given that he was tricked into coming to the Ministry based on the belief that Sirius was in danger.

“Where is he now?” Remus asked. Dumbledore paused as they approached the floo exits.

“He is back at Hogwarts, but given that Sirius is unable to take him, he will be returning to his muggle family for the summer.”

“His muggle — No!” Remus shouted. “They're terrible, Dumbledore. I already told you I wouldn't allow him to go back.”

“And I respected that at the time knowing he would be protected, but given that both Regulus and Sirius are no longer able to take care of him, he must return to them.”

“What about me?” Remus said, hating the way his voice faltered.

“There is something else,” Dumbledore interrupted. “Harry seems to have a kind of connection to Voldemort as is clear given the false vision of Sirius that Voldemort placed in his head. Allowing him to live at the Order headquarters when his thoughts are this unprotected would not be wise. He will be safe from Voldemort with his muggle family.”

Remus seethed with rage after that discussion, hating Dumbledore with every bone in his body even if he understood why he did what he did. He wanted to go straight to the Dursley's home and kidnap Harry all over again, but where would he take him? Grimmauld Place was warded to the nines, but there was no way he could get away with keeping Harry there now.

He wanted to travel to Hogwarts to visit Harry, to make sure he knew he wasn't alone, but Dumbledore stopped him.

“Dolores Umbridge has gone missing in the Forbidden Forest. Draco Malfoy is the only person alive who saw her enter the forest, and the Hogwarts grounds are being heavily searched by Aurors,” he warned. “I do not think it would be wise for you to visit given Ms. Umbridge's history with anti-lycanthropy laws.”

He didn't disagree, since he had been publicly outed as a werewolf by Snape two years prior, he had to be extra careful about where he showed his face. He was still unregistered, and when he was arrested he expected that they would use that fact against him, but the Ministry was thrown by Voldemort's appearance and were clearly struggling to manage everything if they were letting Remus walk free based on the voice of one man. Though to be fair, that man had just been vindicated after a year-long smear campaign, so he must have had some goodwill.

“We have to get Sirius out,” Remus said. “He can't stay there. The dementor's —”

“I agree with you, but until he is awake, they will not be able to get the truth from him.”

Remus was sent back to Grimmauld to wait. He sent a quick letter to Harry asking how he was, though he did not get a response, and then he buried himself in the work of getting Sirius out of the Ministry's hands. He would break into Azkaban if he had to. The night after he was freed, he sat for several long hours at the empty kitchen table. Grimmauld was all but abandoned for the time being as everyone recovered from their last battle and it felt like sitting in a tomb. Molly had taken to placing flowers around the house to add some cheer to the dreary and decaying decor, but now those flowers were slowly dying. Just looking at them made him feel sick with impotence and isolation.

After that night, he pestered everyone he could think of, he buried himself beneath every piece of research he had compiled in the last few months, and he barely slept in the long days that followed. In the end, it was the day Fudge stepped down as Minister of Magic — his denial of Voldemort's return was his ultimate downfall, not to mention Umbridge threatening to use Unforgivables on students — was the thing that did it. Scrimgeour, his predecessor, wasn't a nice man, or one particularly fond of werewolves, but he was willing to listen to Dumbledore, so when Dumbledore demanded that Sirius's case be looked at again, he agreed.

Remus didn't get to see Sirius for even a second while it all went on, but he heard secondhand about them administering Veritaserum and looking at all the evidence that had been disregarded the first time around. There wasn't a trial, only an internal investigation, and then Sirius was freed.

"It'll hit the *Prophet* tomorrow," Kingsley told him. "But they're releasing him in half an hour." Remus was already at the Ministry, he had taken to loitering around when he wasn't actively pursuing someone to speak with. He went right to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement after Kingsley was finished speaking and waited for two Aurors to walk Sirius out toward the lifts.

"Sirius," he breathed. He was dressed in the outfit he arrived at the Ministry in, but it didn't look particularly rumpled or dirty.

"Remus," Sirius responded, a bright smile on his face, his eyes lit up with surprise and excitement. Remus hugged him immediately, letting out a sigh of relief that had been trapped in his chest for days, maybe much longer, certainly since he almost watched Sirius fall through the veil.

They left without speaking, Sirius was not keen on remaining in the Aurors' department any longer and Remus was ready to leave the Ministry and never return. They traveled through the floo to Grimmauld, the house silent and empty. Though some Order members had frequented the headquarters in the previous two weeks, it had dwindled as summer took hold.

"Are you hungry?" Remus asked gently. "Tired?"

"A bit hungry," Sirius said with a shrug. "Where is everyone?"

"I imagine they're at home," Remus said, giving Sirius an odd look. Sirius stared back with one of equal confusion.

“Where is Harry?” Sirius asked.

“Hasn’t anyone come to talk to you?” Remus asked, the relaxed look on Sirius’s face now seen as a terrible omen.

Sirius shook his head. “No,” he said. “There was a healer, but she refused to speak. Think she was a bit afraid of me actually.”

“Sirius,” Remus said, reaching out to touch his shoulder, he knew this wouldn’t be good news. “Harry is with the Dursleys.”

“What? Why?” Sirius asked, his face flooding with surprise and anger.

Remus tried to explain what Dumbledore told him, but Sirius just looked more confused by the minute. “Well, you’re the only one that has any legal claim over Harry. I would never have been able to take him in on my own, but now that you’re out and free, properly this time, I think we can go get him.”

“Yes, let’s do that now,” Sirius said determinedly. “Where is Reggie? I’m surprised he hasn’t thrown a fit about this.”

Remus froze, ice flooding his veins as his blood drained from his face. “Reggie?”

Sirius gave him another odd look. “Yeah? Obviously, he’s not here.”

“You don’t know...” Remus said faintly.

“I don’t know what?” Sirius asked. “Remus, what do I not know?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Sirius gave him an incredulous look, but he answered all the same. “I was dueling with Bellatrix, and she hit me with something. Next thing I knew I was inside a cell at the Ministry and a healer was checking my vitals. That was all, then a few days later they came to interview me with Veritaserum. Remus, tell me what’s going on.” He sounded angry now.

“When you were hit with that spell, you fell backward and almost slipped through the veil,” Remus explained. “It was all happening so quickly, and then Regulus he...”

“What, Remus? What did Reggie —”

“He knocked you out of the way,” Remus whispered. “He didn’t have his wand, I don’t think, so he just hit you from the side and then he — he fell through instead.”

“He fell through...” Sirius said confusedly, his eyebrows furrowed.

“He fell through the veil. He’s dead.”

“No,” Sirius said.

“I don’t think he meant to —”

“No, Remus, no, he can’t be dead.”

“Sirius.”

“NO! Remus, no, he’s not. This isn’t funny. He’s not dead.” His voice was growing frantic, his face flooded with anger and disbelief.

“Sirius, please,” Remus said gently, he took a step toward him, but Sirius shoved him away.

“Don’t lie to me. He’s here. He has to be here. I’m free now, I’m fine. He can’t be dead!” he screamed the last words, his voice cracking harshly. “No, no, no, no,” Sirius ranted, turning away and pulling at his hair brutally. “No, this isn’t real. It’s not real.”

Remus didn’t know how to help him. The last time Regulus died, Remus was out of town when Sirius got the news. By the time he got back, Sirius had cycled out of his disbelief and into rage and hatred. He had been destabilized by the news, though Remus wouldn’t realize that for a long time. This was different, Sirius was a different man now, but Regulus’s death was different too. He had died protecting Sirius, had died for him, and right on the precipice of Sirius’s freedom.

“Who else knows? Who else —”

“Harry was there, he watched it happen, as did a few other Order members,” Remus said softly. Sirius was still turned away from him, his back hunched and his hands still buried in his hair.

“Harry watched Reggie die?” Sirius asked distantly. Remus nodded before remembering that Sirius couldn’t see him.

“Yes,” Remus said.

“Oh,” Sirius said, his voice sounding devoid of emotion suddenly. “I think I need to —”

He didn’t finish his sentence, there was a popping noise and a split second later he was gone. Remus reached forward on instinct, his fingers gripping the empty air where Sirius was standing. He had apparated out of Grimmauld, and Remus had no way of knowing where he went. He sunk down into one of the wide-backed chairs, cradling his head in his hands.

Why didn’t anyone bother to tell him? The public believed that Regulus was his son, even most of the Order members believed that lie, so why didn’t anyone tell him? Not one of the Aurors thought it might be important information.

There was something else that was bothering him, he realized. He had been so caught up with Sirius’s case that he hadn’t had time to process it earlier but now it was really starting to bug him. He went into the kitchen and began digging through the pile of old copies of *The Daily Prophet* that were rotting in the corner of the room. Every single copy from the past two weeks was there.

He dumped them on the table and slowly and meticulously began thumbing through them. Just as he thought, not once did any of them mention Regulus's death. But why not? Surely people knew. Not just because of how many people actively witnessed his death, but because he never returned to school.

He wrote a quick letter to Dumbledore to ask, climbing up to the attic where all the owls were waiting for him. Nyx, Regulus's owl, wasn't there. Remus looked around for her, but she wasn't present. He added a quick addendum to his letter to Dumbledore asking if Nyx was still at Hogwarts for some reason, then sent it off. He was heading back downstairs when he heard someone come through the floo.

"Remus?" Dora yelled.

"Up here, hold on," Remus responded, lumbering down the stairs to find her waiting for him right next to the fireplace. She smiled kindly.

"Hey, I heard the news about Sirius! Is he here?" Dora had never seemed to grasp the fact that Sirius wasn't particularly fond of her, though he had to admit that Sirius worked very hard to keep that fact from her, so perhaps it wasn't her fault.

"Er, he's not taking visitors," Remus responded. "Listen, Dora, I think it would be best if no one visited Grimmauld for a bit."

"Oh," Dora said, looking piteously disappointed. "But what about the Order meetings?"

"I've asked Dumbledore to have them somewhere else," Remus said. Dumbledore hadn't agreed yet, but if he and Sirius wouldn't sacrifice Harry to the Dursleys just so the Order could use Sirius's home. "Sirius needs some time and... space."

"I see," Dora said, frowning. "I know Regulus's death must be weighing on him. Will there be a funeral?"

That brought Remus up short. It seemed so wrong that no one had thought to plan one yet. Didn't anyone care? It all just felt so unfair, so much like it felt during the first war when every single one of them was disposable and loss was just part of life, something to be thrown away and discarded.

"Yes, there will be," Remus said definitively. There wouldn't be a body to bury, but he would make sure Regulus was given a ceremony. He had people who cared about him this time around, unlike last time when his funeral was only attended by family members who Sirius was certain didn't know the first thing about him.

Dora nodded and gave him a kind look. "You'll let me know if you need anything, won't you?"

"Of course," Remus said. He tried not to make it seem like he was shooing her out the door, but he wasn't sure that he succeeded given the way her face fell right before she disappeared into the floo. He didn't want to be cruel, but he didn't have the energy to think about her feelings today. For now, he needed to find Sirius.

It had been nearly an hour since Sirius disappeared, and he couldn't stop thinking of the night James and Lily died, when Sirius went hunting for Peter leading to his unlawful imprisonment. Where would he go now that Regulus had died? He didn't think it would be anywhere good. He worried that Sirius might have done something colossally stupid.

It took him an hour to realize where Sirius might have gone, having spent that time listing off every possible place that might have entered Sirius's addled mind. He apparated immediately, disappearing from Grimmauld and appearing in the middle of Godric's Hollow. He walked quickly down the street and into the cemetery near where James and Lily used to live.

The relief he felt upon seeing Padfoot lying on one of the graves was only matched by the anger and annoyance that flooded his thoughts. The anger won this time.

"Sirius!" he shouted. Padfoot lifted his chin, his ears tucked against his head, but his teeth bared. "You cannot disappear like that. I had no idea what might have happened to you!"

Padfoot growled slightly.

"Don't growl at me!" Remus said sharply. "You don't get to do this. You are not the only one hurt by this news. Harry needs you, don't you get that? This cannot be like last time. I cannot lose—" He cut himself off, already feeling himself losing control of his words.

Padfoot gave him a measured look before transforming back into Sirius who looked guilty and shell-shocked. He didn't speak or stand, only stayed sitting on the ground and staring up at Remus. Remus sighed heavily and plopped down next to him.

"I need you to tell me what you want to do," Remus said, settling on the words as a plea for instruction. "Please, don't ice me out. Just tell me what you want to do." Last time, Sirius was too buried in grief to articulate what he needed. Remus couldn't live through that again.

Sirius watched him for a moment before opening his mouth. "I want to kill Bellatrix," he said. There was a quiet defiance on his face. It was clear that he thought Remus would change the subject or dismiss what he was saying. Remus, for his part, would have done anything to keep Sirius firmly on earth with him.

"Okay," he replied. Sirius's eyebrows shot up as his mouth opened in surprise. "But we need to pick up Harry first."

the funeral.

Chapter Notes

cw: heavy grief and angst, mentions of child neglect and abuse, mentions of starvation as a punishment, general food issues relating to guilt

(please let me know if i've forgotten any warning in this chapter, i tried to include anything)

Harry was lying on the floor again. He couldn't remember the last time he got up, maybe that morning when Aunt Petunia let him out so that he could use the bathroom before locking him back in his room. The sun had set hours ago, but they hadn't brought him dinner yet. Not that Harry would eat it. He'd barely eaten in days, and some of the food that had been slipped through the doggy door was beginning to rot in the corner. Aunt Petunia would probably punish him for that if she found it.

His glasses were sitting on his bed, but he didn't need them as he stared blankly across the room. He was lying on his side, his shoulder bent in a way that he knew would cause pain when he stood up. His cheek rested against the wood beneath him, scraping his dry skin after the long hours spent there.

He heard a light scratching noise at the window and shifted his eyes over to look at it. It was too dark to see, and without his glasses, he could barely make out more than slight movement. It was probably another owl carrying a letter from one of the friends he didn't deserve. The friends he had put in danger because he was too stupid to wait for Re—he broke off, forcibly slipping back into a place in his mind where the memories couldn't visit him.

He heard creaking on the stairs. That would be Aunt Petunia now, probably coming to let him use the bathroom before locking him up for the night. He should probably shower given the way the summer heat was making him sweat during the day, he was sure he smelled terrible, but he didn't know that he cared enough to do so.

He remembered when he was a child and Aunt Petunia would scrub his skin raw if he went too long without bathing. She was never happy about having to take care of him, always treating it like someone was holding a gun to her head. He didn't really blame her though. He didn't want to take care of himself either, how could he expect her to do it?

"Why are there locks on the outside of his door?" he heard someone ask in a low voice. Who was that? He was trying to place it, but his thoughts were sluggish from dehydration. He heard Aunt Petunia responding, she must have been a little farther down the stairs as he could only faintly hear her. She sounded angry. That didn't bode well for him.

The locks were being removed from his door, and he thought about lifting his head to see Aunt Petunia walk in, but decided against it, sighing heavily and sinking further away from his present state. The door opened slowly like the person opening it was uncertain of what they would find on the other side. It was dark in his room, he barely turned the lights on anymore, so he supposed they weren't wrong to be wary.

"Harry?" he heard someone say. He was in the process of lifting his head when they spoke again, yelling this time. "Harry!"

Suddenly he wasn't alone. He should have realized who it was when he heard them outside. Remus was kneeling over him in a flash, his worried and gaunt face a few inches from his own.

"Remus?" Harry asked, his voice scratchy. He felt like he was dreaming.

"Harry, are you okay?" Remus asked frantically.

"What did you do to him?" Sirius roared from somewhere else in the room.

"I'm fine," Harry mumbled, answering Remus's question.

"I didn't do anything to him!" Aunt Petunia cried, shouting in surprise before she ran down the stairs.

"Come on," Remus said. "Let's get you out of here." Remus helped pull him to his feet, and when he swayed dizzily, he put an arm around his shoulders to keep him standing. Remus reached over and turned on his lamp, and Harry squinted when the harsh light flooded his unprepared eyes. "Here." Remus handed him his glasses.

"Thanks," Harry said quietly.

"Where is your trunk?" Remus asked.

"It's locked downstairs," Harry said.

"I'll get it," Sirius said gruffly, exiting the room before Harry could get a good look at him.

"Oh," Remus said quietly. Harry looked at him curiously, then followed his eyeline to the rotting food in the corner of the room. He felt awash with embarrassment.

"Sorry, I need to clean that," Harry said worriedly.

"No need," Remus replied evenly, pulling out his wand and vanishing the mess.

"I don't think you're supposed to do magic here." Harry had gotten into trouble when Dobby did magic, he hoped he wouldn't end up expelled because Remus was using an actual wand.

"Don't worry about that," Remus replied. "Help me gather your stuff." Harry started pulling out his clothes and the few items he kept hidden under the floorboards, mostly the nicer

pieces of clothing that Remus had been gifted and a few books. Sirius came back upstairs a moment later with his trunk in tow and together they piled Harry's belongings into it.

"Is that everything?" Sirius asked. He wasn't looking at Harry, his focus shooting around the room like he was looking for threats.

"Just Hedwig's cage," Harry responded.

"Oh, there's Nyx," Remus said faintly. Harry turned to see Nyx, the owl Sirius purchased for—pecking at the window. "I wondered where she ended up." He opened the window and instructed her to meet them at Grimmauld, letting Hedwig out as well to fly on her own. He shrunk her cage and shoved it in his pocket while Sirius did the same to the trunk.

"Okay, ready?" Sirius asked.

"Ready for what?" Harry asked, perhaps a bit dumbly. It would probably be obvious to anyone else, but he needed someone to spell it out for him. Where were they going to take him? He wondered distantly if they were going to hurt him because of what he had done.

"We're going home," Remus said firmly. He followed Sirius down the stairs, Remus staying close to him the entire time. Harry didn't even spare Aunt Petunia or her house a passing glance as he followed them out into the street and vanished into thin air.

They arrived at Grimmauld Place a moment later and the numbness Harry had been settled into began to wash away, revealing the clawing panic underneath. He sucked in a breath as Remus reached around to squeeze his shoulder.

"Are you hungry?" Sirius asked as they walked in the front door. Harry shook his head when Sirius turned to look at him. Their eyes met for the first time since Sirius arrived at the Department of Mysteries with the rest of the Order. Harry looked away quickly, staring down at his feet. "Okay, well, if you want to get settled in. I need to fire call Dumbledore."

"All right," Harry mumbled quietly, but Sirius was already gone, walking into the kitchen. Harry had the sudden urge to cry, and he scrunched up his face to keep from doing so where someone could see him.

"Just let us know if you change your mind," Remus said softly, bending down slightly so that they were eye to eye. "And Harry," he paused, cringing slightly, "maybe a shower would do you some good?"

Harry flushed bright red but nodded. He escaped quickly up the stairs and went right into the room he'd lived in the previous summer. The pictures of half-naked muggle women were blacked out but still hung on the walls, and he always felt a sting of mortification when he remembered they were there. He shed his clothes, dropping them haphazardly, and climbed into the shower in the ensuite bathroom, thankful for the privacy.

He hated being at the Dursleys' house, but it was almost worse being in Grimmauld. The feeling of who was missing was so stark and painful. He leaned his head heavily against the

shower wall, hoping that the water would just drown him before he had to get out. It felt so wrong to be here, accepting any sort of hospitality when he knew he didn't deserve it.

Regulus — the name alone caused a wave of nausea to fill him — had been the one to push Sirius and Remus to take him in the first time, and now Harry was selfishly allowing them to take him again even though he was the reason Regulus was dead. It had been his fault and there would never be another moment in his life where he didn't know that. If he had just waited, if he had just listened to Regulus...

He ended up sitting down in the shower and staying under the water until his fingers were prune. When he walked back into the bedroom, he noticed that the clothes he'd left on the floor were gone and his trunk was now sitting at the foot of the bed. He hadn't meant for them to pick up after him.

That night he dreamt of his cupboard under the stairs. He had burned breakfast that morning, getting distracted by the cartoon Dudley was watching in the other room. He never got to sit down and watch them, but if he strained his hearing, then he could just barely make out what was happening. Aunt Petunia smacked him on the wrist when she found the bacon burning on the stove and shoved him into the cupboard without food.

For Harry, there were always two main punishments when he did something wrong: cleaning and lack of meals. He had regular chores like cooking or weeding the garden, but cleaning was usually left to punishments. He had never actually seen Aunt Petunia clean though, his punishments often overlapping so that he did the bulk, if not all, of the cleaning in the house.

He vastly preferred cleaning to what he was enduring now, sitting in the dark cupboard with his stomach rumbling angrily. He curled up in the corner of the small space, pulling his legs away from where he knew a spider's web sat on the opposite wall. He didn't want to end up with another spider bite, the last one had taken weeks to heal properly.

He woke to Remus knocking softly on the door. "We're making breakfast if you want to come down," Remus said kindly. Harry lifted his head sleepily but nodded. His stomach felt hollow, but there was something comforting about that. He didn't bother dressing before clambering down the stairs.

"Morning. Did you sleep okay?" Sirius said when he entered the room. He was already sitting at the kitchen table, a copy of *The Daily Prophet* open in front of him.

"Yes, I slept fine," Harry answered as politely as he could manage, staring down at the table. Sirius was silent, not adding anything. Harry didn't understand how he could even bear to be in the same room.

"I don't know if you heard," Remus said, his voice light and friendly, though it sounded a bit forced, "but Sirius has been exonerated."

"Really?" Harry said, his head snapping up to look at Remus. Remus nodded, a small smile on his lips. "When?"

“Yesterday,” Sirius said. He slid the *Prophet* over so that Harry could see it. The front page was covered in a picture of Sirius when he was much younger before he was sent to Azkaban, the article announcing his freedom.

“Wow,” Harry breathed. He wanted to feel happy about this, but all he could think was that Regulus would have been ecstatic and now he would never get to witness it.

“There is something else,” Sirius said solemnly. Harry looked up nervously to find him staring straight ahead, his eyebrows furrowed. “There hasn’t been any published news about Reg—” he cut off with a cough.

“We’ve decided to have a funeral for him,” Remus jumped in to say. “It will just be other Order members since it’s too dangerous to invite anyone else, but we wanted to... honor him.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “When?”

“Two days from now,” Remus answered. Harry nodded, his stomach clenching painfully.

“May I be excused?” he whispered.

“What?” Sirius asked distractedly.

“Yes,” Remus said at the same time. His gentle tone was starting to grate on him. He stood up from the table quickly, the chair scratching against the floor loudly as he pushed away, and he fled the room leaving his breakfast untouched and uneaten.

He went right back up to his room, closing the door behind him, and impulsively walked into the wardrobe on the other side of the room. It wasn’t until he was locked in the dark, tiny space that he felt like he could breathe again. Weren’t Sirius and Remus going to punish him? What were they waiting for?

He tried to breathe normally, but he could feel his breaths getting shorter as the moments passed and soon enough he was fully hyperventilating. It was pitch black in the cupboard so he had no idea if his eyes were opened or closed. He thought he might have passed out for a bit, but he would never be sure.

They were going to punish him. He had done something wrong. He deserved whatever they did to him, but he hated the waiting, he hated not knowing. He couldn’t even think of the funeral. Would he even be allowed to go? He couldn’t remember what words Remus had spoken that morning, they were fuzzy like a distant memory rather than something that happened a few hours ago.

By the time he dragged himself out of the wardrobe, the sun was setting. He still felt panicked, his nails bitten down to the quick, but at least he was breathing. He found a plate of food under a warming charm waiting for him outside his bedroom door, but beyond that the house was quiet. He vanished the food without eating it, thankful that he was able to use magic again now that he was in a wizard’s residence. He didn’t deserve food, and the emptiness inside him was a comfort.

He paced his room for a moment, wishing he could sink back into numbness, but unwilling to get back into the cupboard. He was beginning to feel claustrophobic, not just in the small dark space, but even in his bedroom. It felt like the walls were closing in on him. He thought about leaving to go find Remus or Sirius, but he didn't think he could face them.

His breaths were beginning to quicken again as he looked around the room frantically. He couldn't stop thinking of the way he burned breakfast for the Dursleys, the way Aunt Petunia shut him up in the cupboard under the stairs. Those were terrible punishments because he couldn't do anything but sit and wait for it to be over.

He much preferred the ones tied to tasks because then he knew when they would end. If he was told to clean the kitchen floors by hand, then he knew he just had to make sure the floors were spotless and he would be free. It didn't matter that the punishments were constant and overlapping, he had a goal to work toward and that was enough.

That seemed to be the only thing in his head as he filled the sink with warm water and used a flannel to scrub the counters. He didn't know where their cleaning supplies were, but he didn't want to look for them right that moment. Once the counters were cleaned, he moved on to the shower, and after that, to the floors. By the time the bathroom was spotless, it was deep into the night, well after midnight and his body ached from cleaning so roughly. He collapsed into bed and slept for as long as he could.

Remus woke him the next day to tell him about breakfast and gently asked if he wanted to eat in his room or downstairs with them.

"In my room, please," Harry mumbled tiredly. Remus only nodded and brought a hot plate of food, setting it next to his bed before quietly exiting the room. He let the food sit there as he drifted back to sleep, but he was woken by a nightmare not long after and resigned himself to being awake.

He vanished the food again, ignoring the way his stomach ached with hunger, and went out in search of cleaning supplies. He wondered where Kreacher was, he would certainly know where to find everything, but the house elf was nowhere to be found. He heard Remus and Sirius arguing behind the closed library doors, but he couldn't make out what either of them was saying, and he skirted around the room before they could catch him eavesdropping.

The arguing lingered in his mind though, and he couldn't help wondering if it was about him. They hadn't brought up the way he killed Regulus, but he knew it was only a matter of time. What would they do when they finally talked about it? Would they lock him up for the rest of the summer? Would they make him do chores? Would they send him back?

That thought caused an unpleasant shiver to race down his spine. He didn't want to be sent back to the Dursleys' but would he deserve it? He felt vaguely ill at the thought and reinitiated his search for cleaning supplies. He found a very old bucket in a cupboard in the kitchen and an unlabeled potion that upon further inspection he believed was used for cleaning floors.

He went back to his room and spent the rest of the day cleaning, scrubbing every inch of the room until it looked brand new. He stopped briefly when Remus brought him dinner. He

lingered in the hallway trying to initiate a conversation with Harry, but Harry wasn't much interested in talking. He hated the patient way that Remus was using to speak to him like he was just biding his time before the other shoe dropped.

"We're going to have his funeral tomorrow so you'll need to be up and dressed by nine, okay?" Remus said.

Why won't you just punish me? Harry wanted to yell. Instead, he said, "Okay."

He dressed numbly the next morning and walked downstairs where Remus gave him a few pieces of buttered toast. He ate one of them slowly, nibbling on it little by little. He didn't feel much like eating, given what was happening that day, but Remus was watching him worriedly so he was doing his best to finish something. Sirius was nowhere to be found.

"Where is the funeral taking place?"

"At the Black mausoleum in a wizarding cemetery in London," Remus said. "It seemed only proper —"

"Proper my arse," Sirius muttered, stumbling into the room. He looked disheveled, his eyes sunken into his face. Remus gave him a dark look but didn't bother replying to that.

"Are you ready to go?" Remus asked both of them. Harry nodded silently, and Sirius grunted in reply.

They apparated to the cemetery. It looked like a normal cemetery from outside the gates, but the moment they crossed the threshold, Harry could make out the most peculiar gravestones. He hadn't expected them to be any different than muggle gravestones given the standard way his parents' looked, but these were infused with magic. One, in particular, had a statue of a dragon on top that was circling like a dog before it settled down to take a nap. Another looked plain but every couple of seconds, tiny magical fireworks would appear above it.

"Hate this place," Sirius mumbled to himself. He was stomping ahead of them, Harry trailing behind as he was distracted by each grave.

They walked into an ornate and massive mausoleum at the very center of the cemetery. It was even bigger on the inside, the walls lined with names of dead members of the Black family. There was a small crowd of people waiting for them. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were the first ones to spot them, Mrs. Weasley coming right over and hugging Harry so tightly that he couldn't breathe. Bill, Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny were all there, as were Tonks, Hagrid, Fleur, and Cedric Diggory.

The last two were the biggest surprise to Harry, but he wouldn't get a chance to speak to any of them until after the ceremony. Harry had never been to a funeral, but he had seen a few of them on TV. He thought there were supposed to be eulogies or something. Perhaps wizards didn't do that. Instead, there was some kind of magical ritual led by Sirius and Mr. Weasley, but none of it was something Harry could understand. Their wands connected with a glittery silver string, as they muttered words he didn't know out loud. A few seconds into the ritual, the doors to the mausoleum opened and Bellatrix Lestrange walked in.

Harry was on his feet immediately, panic and rage surging through him. He drew his wand, only stopping when Remus grabbed his arm. Bellatrix gave him a startled look before her eyes slid over to Sirius and she smiled softly. It changed her face completely and he realized instantly that it wasn't her. That soft look couldn't ever appear on Bellatrix's murderous face.

"Andy," Sirius said, dropping the spell he was casting so he could walk over and hug her. Harry sat down, flushing with embarrassment. The two of them looked very similar, and given that the woman looked almost identical to Bellatrix, he would guess that Sirius and Andy were cousins.

"That's my mum," Tonks whispered to him suddenly. "I don't think you've met before. Her name is Andromeda."

"Oh," Harry replied awkwardly. "She looks a bit like..." he drifted off, unsure if Tonks would be offended by the comparison. She huffed a laugh.

"Definitely," she agreed. "They couldn't be more different though. I promise." She gave him a kind smile and he relaxed slightly. He forgot how much he liked Tonks given everything else going on.

Andromeda took over for Mr. Weasley and she and Sirius started up the odd rituals again. Harry looked around the room as they carried on. Mr. Weasley had his arm around Mrs. Weasley now and though she looked mournful, she wasn't crying. That surprised Harry and irritated him a bit. He knew it was irrational, but it felt like an insult. Tonks was sitting next to him, with Remus on his other side, both of them stared forward looking unaffected, but not in a callous way, more like they had buried their emotions too deeply to be seen.

Fred and George both looked serious and unhappy, more angry than sad. Bill was next to them with Fleur tucked under his arm. That was new, Harry thought. He wondered when they met. Ginny was crying quietly, tears streaming continuously down her face. She wasn't bothering to wipe them off. He felt terrible seeing her cry and vaguely wished he could comfort her, but he didn't have anything to offer. Not to any of them.

Ron wasn't crying, and he didn't look sad, instead, he had a dazed look on his face. It reminded Harry of the face he would get when Trelawney would ask what he saw in a crystal ball. Beyond that, there was something else in his eyes that Harry couldn't quite place. It almost looked like the expression he got when he was about to demolish someone during a chess game, a sort of cunning strategic look that Harry had learned to have a healthy fear of.

Hagrid and Cedric were in the very back. Hagrid was openly and loudly crying, really the only one in the room who was making noise, and Cedric was rubbing his back placatingly. Harry didn't understand why he was there at all. He glanced back at Andromeda and Sirius, both of them looked so grim that it made him feel sick just watching them. It felt like his heart rate was beginning to race in his chest, and he dug his nails into the palms of his hands to keep from losing it.

After a long few minutes, Andromeda and Sirius finally finished whatever they were doing and Harry watched in real-time as Regulus's name appeared on the wall of deceased family members. It was only a few places below where his name was written on the wall last time. It

was odd to see the visual representation of the two lives Regulus had led. Both were cut short, both times at the fault of someone else.

Suddenly, the room felt far too tiny. Harry jumped to his feet, intending to slip from the room quietly and without drawing attention, but everyone looked at him, and in a panic, he sprinted out of the mausoleum, clambering out of the room loudly. He didn't know where he was going, but he didn't stop until he was surrounded by gravestones that he didn't recognize. He curled up behind one not bothering to check the name and tucked his head between his knees, trying desperately to slow his breathing.

He shouldn't be here, he thought. He killed Regulus. Regulus was dead because of him. He didn't deserve to sit with all these people and mourn his death. He shouldn't be here. It was his fault. His fault. *His fault. His fault. His fault. His fault. His fault. His fault. His* —

“Harry?” He lifted his head to see Cedric come around a corner. “Harry, are you all right?” Cedric knelt next to him, putting a strong hand on the back of his neck. Harry nodded. He didn't feel like he could speak. Cedric gave him an understanding look and sat down next to him.

He wanted to duck his head back between his knees, but he felt odd doing that next to Cedric. Cedric didn't speak for a long few minutes, and Harry was just beginning to feel uncomfortable in the silence when he opened his mouth.

“I'm really sorry about Regulus,” Cedric said.

Harry nodded, but didn't respond. He wasn't sure what he could say that would be an appropriate response.

“I can't even imagine how you're feeling losing a friend like that. When I was in first year, another Hogwarts student was killed. I think she was in sixth year if I remember correctly. It felt like the entire school mourned her death.”

Is this supposed to make me feel better? Harry thought but didn't say.

“I'm just saying,” Cedric added, almost as if he could hear Harry's thoughts, “that you're not alone. I barely knew him, but it was clear that a lot of people cared about Regulus. You don't have to carry this on your own.”

“Yeah, except no one else at school is responsible for Regulus's death,” Harry snapped, immediately feeling guilty. He knew that Cedric was just trying to help.

“Is that what you think?”

“It's what I know,” Harry said despondently.

Cedric was quiet for a moment, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I only interacted with Regulus a few times, but I always got the impression that he didn't like me very much.”

Harry choked on his tongue, clearing his throat roughly. “He —”

Cedric waved him off. "It's fine. I'm not offended. But I always thought it was interesting because he was so protective of you. He acted like he was your parent."

"Yeah," Harry muttered, unsure of what Cedric was getting at.

Cedric smiled at him. "I don't think a person who cared about you that much would be very happy seeing you suffer like this."

"You don't —"

"I know," Cedric said quickly. "Like I said, I didn't know him well, but I could see that he wanted you to be happy. I doubt he would want you punishing yourself forever."

Harry stared at him bewilderedly. He didn't know how to respond to that and his untethered thoughts swirled in his head. Cedric just watched him back, a knowing smile on his lips. Harry blinked at him and Cedric, as if in slow motion, leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss against Harry's cheek. Harry gasped slightly, staring at Cedric as he pulled away.

"Come on," Cedric said, standing fluidly and holding out his hand for Harry. "Everyone is waiting for you." Harry took his hand as Cedric pulled him up, but dropped it immediately. He was sure his face was bright red. The place on his cheek where Cedric kissed him was buzzing slightly.

As they approached the mausoleum, Harry was surprised to see Dumbledore waiting for them. He didn't realize it originally, but in retrospect, it was odd that he wasn't there for the funeral. Dumbledore gave him a brief look before turning back to say something quietly to Sirius.

Sirius was red in the face and immediately started snarling words at the old headmaster. Dumbledore didn't even react, though Remus walked over and placed a hand on Sirius's shoulder. Sirius shook him off roughly and took another step toward Dumbledore. He pointed his finger right in Dumbledore's face and hissed something so lowly that Harry couldn't make it out.

"We will need to find a new headquarters for the Order," Dumbledore said evenly, seeming completely unaffected by Sirius's rage.

"Fine," Sirius growled.

"Harry, there you are," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly. "We're heading back to Grimmauld. Do you mind side-alonging with me?"

"No, that's fine," Harry agreed quietly, embarrassed now by the way he'd run out of the funeral.

"I'll see you later, Harry," Cedric said. "Try to remember what I said." Harry gave him a small smile and a moment later disappeared with Mrs. Weasley.

"Remus and Sirius needed to run an errand," Mrs. Weasley said. "I hope you don't mind me staying here for a bit."

“That’s okay,” Harry said just as Ron and Ginny arrived with Mr. Weasley.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley immediately went into the kitchen, speaking in quiet, worried tones, and Harry was left alone with Ginny and Ron. Ginny had stopped crying, but Ron still looked a little dazed and disconnected.

“Oh, Harry,” Ginny said, walking forward and hugging him firmly. He hugged her back instantly.

“Why were you the only two there?” he asked once Ginny pulled away, unaware that he was going to ask the question before it was out of his mouth.

“Dad said that Regulus’s death wasn’t in the papers and they didn’t want to announce it too publicly otherwise Death Eaters might show up to the funeral. They said it was too dangerous for too many people to come,” Ron explained.

“Oh,” Harry said. “I was surprised Hermione wasn’t there.”

Ron cringed slightly. “Yeah, she’s been trying to reach you. All of us have, but you haven’t been responding.”

“Er, sorry, I haven’t really...” He wasn’t sure how to explain it. The truth was that he hadn’t wanted to talk to anyone, but that felt a bit too cruel to say out loud.

“I know,” Ron said. “But you’re not the only one that cared about him, you know? And it’s not like Hermione can explain his death to her family. She’s only got us.”

Harry felt a new and unique wave of guilt crash into him, an added bonus to the guilt he was already drowning in. He swallowed harshly. “I’ll write her,” he said.

Ron nodded. They all fell silent, the three of them standing in the foyer as they all avoided each other’s eyes. Harry slowly glanced at Ginny, but she looked like she might cry again, and Harry didn’t think he would handle that well. He looked at Ron next to find that odd strategist look in his eyes again.

“I’m going upstairs,” Harry said suddenly. He didn’t want to spend any more time around people today. He would write Hermione, just not today.

“Yeah,” Ginny said, instantly turning to follow her parents into the kitchen. Ron nodded as well and started heading toward the library.

Harry clambered up the stairs quickly and locked his door the moment he was inside. He felt like he blinked and opened his eyes to find himself back in the wardrobe. He couldn’t help it, his breath was speeding up rapidly, and the panic attack from earlier that had been interrupted was back with a vengeance to finish the job.

His fault. His fault. His fault.

the traps.

“You must understand, Sirius. The Dursleys offer Harry something you cannot provide. The blood protection he has there will keep him safe from Voldemort,” Dumbledore said evenly.

“He’s safest with me,” Sirius snarled. “I’m not going to take him back there so that he can be neglected by those awful people. They had him locked in a room. He was barely taken care of. I won’t allow it.”

“I implore you to see reason,” Dumbledore tried again. The rest of Sirius’s patience snapped, and he took a menacing step toward the old man. Remus placed a hand on his shoulder as if to calm him, but Sirius shook it off.

“Petunia and Vernon Dursley are only alive because I can’t risk being sent back to Azkaban, but hear me when I say this,” he snarled, “I will kill both of them and that awful kid of theirs before I allow Harry to be sent back there.”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose, but otherwise, he did not react to this threat. He gave a solemn nod and frowned tightly. “We will need to find a new headquarters for the Order,” he said.

“Fine,” Sirius said, turning away from him just as Molly popped out of existence with Harry in tow. He had originally wanted to speak to Harry after the funeral service, but now he felt a bit relieved that Harry wasn’t there to watch him lose his mind. He would speak to him when he and Remus returned home. For now, Molly and her children could keep him company.

“Are you ready?” Remus whispered to him.

Sirius nodded. “Let me just say goodbye to everyone.”

He was a bit surprised by how levelheaded he felt today given the way his thoughts tended to destabilize. Somewhere deep in his mind, he knew it was because he had a task to focus on. The moment that task was completed, he knew the knowledge that Regulus was gone would seep into his bones, bleeding into every crevice in his mind, and would destroy him.

“Sirius,” Andromeda said as he walked toward her. He wasn’t expecting to see her. He hadn’t spoken to her since he got out of Azkaban, too caught up with everything else, and honestly, too embarrassed by the man he was now to spend time in the presence of the cousin who never once let her decorum slip even as she ran from the family. She hugged him tightly as he approached her, and for a moment he felt like he was fifteen, abandoned by his family and unloved by his parents and brother, and he wanted to start crying.

He swallowed harshly. “Thank you so much for coming,” he mumbled. “Did Tonks tell you about it?”

“Tonks,” Andromeda muttered dismissively. She wasn’t fond of the name, that much was obvious. “Yes, she told me. I can’t believe I never knew that you had a son.”

Sirius blinked in confusion and surprise. “Oh, you don’t know,” he said.

“What don’t I know?” she asked. He shook his head.

“I’ll explain, but just not today,” he said. “Today... I can’t.”

“Okay,” she said gently, rubbing his upper arm comfortingly. “Come by for tea anytime. Ted and I would love to see you. And of course, Remus is always welcome.” There was a sparkle in her eye as she said Remus’s name that made Sirius’s stomach clench painfully. Was that look associated with him, or with Tonks?

“Of course, thank you,” he said. He made quick work of bidding everyone else goodbye. He was a tad confused by Hagrid, Cedric, and Fleur’s attendance but didn’t care enough to ask why they were there, and he thanked them for attending all the same. Remus was waiting for him, looking handsome and patient as he stood with his hands behind his back.

“All right?” he asked. Sirius nodded. He wanted to crawl into his arms and fall asleep, but there was a sting there that he couldn’t let go of. Even looking at Remus caused him pain and now wasn’t the time to deal with it.

They had spent the last two days talking about their plan to kill Bellatrix. Sirius had to admit that he was surprised when Remus so readily agreed to it. He had spat the words in anger, his deepest desire worn right on his sleeve, but Remus had only looked grim. Even now he wasn’t trying to talk Sirius out of it. Instead, he was trying to help him, though Sirius didn’t fully know why. He never thought Remus was one for murder, but he guessed he didn’t know this Remus all that well.

“I’m not sure how we’re going to find her,” Remus said to him yesterday morning. “She doesn’t exactly go out, and even if she is somewhere, she’s bound to be surrounded by Death Eaters, if not Voldemort himself.”

“That’s true,” Sirius said. “She would have been with the Lestrangle brothers before they were arrested. They would have been easier to find.”

“And easier to kill,” Remus muttered. Sirius raised his eyebrows at him, but Remus just continued to look at the table in consternation. “Why don’t we start at Lestrangle Manor? It’s possible that they visit there now that it isn’t under constant watch by the Aurors.”

“You don’t think it is?” Sirius asked.

Remus shrugged. “Why would it be? They’re in Azkaban right now, and other than Bellatrix, no one else is likely to frequent their house.”

That was where they were headed right after Regulus’s funeral. Remus kept harping on about *honoring* him with a funeral and how it would be good *closure*, but it all just felt like a vapid act, one that Regulus probably would have hated. Hunting down Bellatrix felt much closer to honoring him.

Sirius had only been to Lestrangle Manor one time. He was in his first year at Hogwarts when Bellatrix married Rodolphus. It was a huge deal in their family, the first of the next generation was getting married. The partnership was planned by Cygnus, and Bellatrix only found out about it two months before she was set to be married. Andromeda told him that Bellatrix was furious, destroying half of Cygnus's office before he had to place her under the Imperius Curse to get her to stop. At the time, Sirius nodded like this was a normal response. He hadn't quite learned how horrible his childhood was, not until second year.

He and his brother were dressed in extremely expensive dress robes and made to attend the wedding that took place on the Lestrangle Manor grounds. It was a large ceremony with many other pureblood families in attendance, though Bellatrix spent the entire time looking annoyed like she was a moment away from biting Rodolphus's throat out.

Sirius remembered the way the grounds were decorated lavishly, meant to impress all of their peers, with the dark manor on the hill towering over the grounds menacingly. Now, it looked very different. The grounds were dead, even though it was the middle of summer. He wondered if it was just a lack of care or if dark magic played a part in the decay of the land. The manor itself was clearly in a state of disrepair, even from the outside. Half the windows looked like they had been blown out by a storm, and the front door was off its hinges and leaning against the doorframe.

"There are no wards," Remus said thoughtfully as they walked up toward the manor.

"The Aurors might have taken them down when they ransacked the house," Sirius responded. Even though there weren't wards to keep him out, he felt unsettled as they approached the front door. It felt almost like they were being watched.

"We should check for traps," Remus whispered. Sirius understood the impulse to be quiet, it felt like if they were too loud something lying in wait in the house would hear them coming and attack.

"Yeah, good idea," Sirius said. He cast a quick *revelio* charm and immediately multiple objects lit up through the walls. "The entire house is booby-trapped. Why aren't any of them disarmed? I thought the Aurors were here."

"Maybe they set them after the Aurors searched the places. Do you think the traps are meant to kill us or to summon someone to our location?"

"I don't know," Sirius said. "It could be a mix of both, but there might not be a way to tell."

"So what do we do?" Remus asked, staring worriedly at the shining objects as the lights began to slowly fade.

"I think we're going to need a curse breaker if we want to search the house properly," Sirius responded with a frown. "Let's see if we can't get a better look at them first though."

"Okay," Remus agreed to Sirius's surprise. He knew that this agreeable attitude from Remus would eventually run its course, but he was mostly surprised that it hadn't already. He wasn't going to question it yet though, not until Bellatrix had taken her last breath.

They removed the front door as they walked in, vanishing it all together just to be safe, and entered the foyer slowly and carefully.

“*Revelio*,” Remus cast with a small flick of his wand. The room looked nearly empty to the naked eye, the only furniture and objects left were either broken or old and dingy. However, the moment Remus cast the spell, Sirius realized that nearly every object there lit up with magic.

“Did they place a curse on every object in the house?” Sirius said, only half serious.

“When did they even get the time?” Remus responded. Though many old pureblood families had long histories of curses created by their ancestors and had access to curses that muggleborns and half-bloods couldn’t even imagine, it still wasn’t easy to curse an object. It wasn’t the same as casting a spell, there was an intricacy to it. Plus, it was very draining on the body. It required a massive amount of focus and magical power to place a curse on an object. Creating this many curses over just a few months seemed like it would be nearly impossible.

“*Homenum Revelio Maxima*,” Sirius said. Nothing appeared. Unless someone had a very advanced invisibility cloak, the manor was empty.

“I doubt anyone is coming back here for visits,” Remus muttered. “I’m not sure what we can even find here.”

“No, me neither,” Sirius said. “Do you think anyone checks in on the property?”

“Doubtful,” Remus responded.

Sirius frowned. “I think we should set up a ward to alert us if anyone does come back.” Remus nodded in agreement. “But I don’t think it’s worth our time to search this minefield.”

“Minefield,” Remus said with a chuckle. “Where did you learn about mines?”

Sirius smiled. “Arthur Weasley,” Sirius said. “We started talking about the way muggles fight their wars, and he came over one night to tell me all about mines. He’s very... excitable when it comes to muggles.”

Remus laughed loudly. “Yes, that’s one way of putting it. Did you talk to him about your enchanted vehicles? From the way Harry describes it, his flying car isn’t that different from your motorbike.”

Sirius smiled despite himself. The motorbike brought sharp and painful memories to the surface, but beneath them was that naive excitement and fondness that he used to feel. “Yes, we talked about them. Did you know that he writes all the laws for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office? He made enough loopholes so that he wouldn’t get in trouble for enchanting all those muggle items he finds, as long as he does it in a very specific way.”

“Huh, that I didn’t know,” Remus replied.

“Never let those Weasleys fool you, they’re just as corrupt as the rest of us,” Sirius said with a grin. Remus laughed.

“I’ll keep an eye out for them,” he said with false seriousness.

Sirius chuckled but sobered a moment later. “What do we do now? Bellatrix obviously isn’t here.”

“What about Malfoy Manor?” Remus asked. “Lucius wasn’t arrested with the others, though Harry said he was there. Maybe they all went back there. It would have the wards to keep unwanted visitors out.”

“Yes, but unfortunately we would be included in that unwanted visitors category.”

“What about Kreacher?” Remus said after a beat of silence. “House-elves might be able to travel in and out. He could at least find out if Bellatrix is there.”

“Of course,” Sirius said. He hadn’t thought about Kreacher at all since he was freed, though now he realized that the house elf had been noticeably absent from Grimmauld. It wasn’t uncommon for Kreacher to disappear for days at a time. Sirius turned and walked back out onto the grounds before calling him. “Kreacher.”

The ancient house elf popped into existence immediately. He looked different than the last time Sirius had seen him. His ears looked like they’d been burned with fiendfire, they were black and crispy. His hands bore multiple wounds like he had been punishing himself. Sirius thought about asking why Kreacher felt the need to do that, but Walburga had entrenched their house elves with so much bizarre training that he could have done that for failing to clean the attic for all Sirius knew. Besides, he wasn’t that interested in Kreacher’s inner life.

“Can you get in and out of Malfoy Manor?” he asked. Kreacher gave him a resentful look and did not answer. “Tell me the truth.”

“Yes, Kreacher can get into Malfoy Manor.”

“Go there and see if Bellatrix Lestrange is living there, then come right back and tell me.” He tried to be as clear as possible, Kreacher would probably try to weasel out of the instructions if he could figure out a way.

Kreacher bowed deeply and popped away with a snap. “I wonder how long it’ll take him,” Remus said thoughtfully.

Sirius shrugged. “He’ll probably take as long as he can,” Sirius said honestly.

“Should we head home then?”

“No, I’m going to wait here,” Sirius said. The thought of returning to Grimmauld so soon made his chest feel tight. He took a seat down on the dead lawn, leaning against the half-destroyed stone wall that surrounded the grounds. Remus was looking at him with a deep frown, but he didn’t argue. Eventually, he sighed and sat down as well.

“I know you don’t want to,” Remus said gently, Sirius tensed up immediately, “but I think we should talk about Harry.”

Sirius relaxed slightly. That was better than talking about Regulus at least, or about them, not that Remus would bring that up anytime soon. Or ever.

“I want to adopt him,” Sirius said, confessing the words that had been living inside him longer than he realized. It seemed too far out of reach before, but now that he was free, actually free, well, it could be an option.

Remus sucked in a breath, and Sirius braced himself for the discourse, but when Remus spoke it was with a reverence that Sirius hadn’t heard in a long time. “I think that’s a great idea,” he said.

Sirius felt the sudden urge to cry, the words like a soft blanket, more caring than what he was used to. He swallowed down the feeling. “Do you think he would want that?” Sirius said, annoyed by how insecure he sounded.

“Yes,” Remus said. “I think he would want that.”

“I was thinking I would ask him tomorrow,” Sirius said, “but he hasn’t seemed like he wanted to speak much yet.”

Remus nodded. “I think he’s really struggling,” Remus said softly. “I don’t think he’s been eating much. He looked thinner than the last time I saw him.”

Sirius leaned his head back against the stone wall again, blowing out a heavy breath. “I didn’t notice that, but now that you mention it... What do we do? I don’t — I have no idea how to help him.” He felt embarrassed admitting it, but it was the truth.

“You should talk to him about Regulus,” Remus said. Sirius flinched slightly. “I know you don’t want to, but Harry has never lost anyone like this before. He was too young to remember his parents dying.”

“Oh, but I’m well acquainted to loss?” Sirius said a bit sharply. The pain never got any easier. And Regulus... He’d already lost Regulus and had been given a stupid second chance only to lose him again. It felt like a punishment. Not to mention that Regulus died protecting him. He felt guilty the first time around, he’d abandoned his brother, and it led to his death. He didn’t abandon him this time, and yet he still caused his death. It was like he couldn’t stop causing bad things to happen to everyone around him. That final conversation he had with his father made another painful appearance in his thoughts.

“You know how to survive it,” Remus said. “Harry cared about Regulus. I think he saw him almost as a parent. I think it would make him feel better to know that you loved him too.”

Sirius shut his eyes, hoping to block out all the feelings that were dancing around him. He was afraid he would open his eyes to another hallucination, James giving him those sad eyes, Lily reminding him what a failure he was, or his father pointing out all his flaws. Would he see Regulus now? Would he be just another dead person sticking around just to torment him?

He didn't respond to Remus, but Remus thankfully didn't push it. He couldn't talk about this now, not yet. They settled in to wait, watching as the sun dipped low in the sky and slowly began to slide beyond the horizon. It was late and they'd been waiting for hours, though Sirius felt calm and patient. It was better than waiting at Grimmauld.

When Kreacher popped back into existence, the noise caused Sirius and Remus to startle.

"Kreacher has seen Mistress Bellatrix. She is among the Malfoys."

"Who else is in the house?" Sirius said, quickly adding, "Tell me the truth."

"Mistress Bellatrix's sister, Mistress Bellatrix's sister's husband, Young Master Draco, and the Dark Lord," Kreacher responded slowly.

"Quite the party," Remus said wryly. Sirius smirked slightly.

"The Dark — Voldemort lives there?" Sirius asked. Kreacher nodded. He sat for a moment, trying to figure out what might be the best course of action. "Kreacher, go and watch them, but stay hidden. Do not allow Bellatrix or any of the others to find out that you are there. The moment Bellatrix is there without the presence of Voldemort, come and find me. Do you understand?"

"Kreacher understands," Kreacher croaked.

"Go."

Kreacher disappeared and Sirius looked over at Remus. "It's a good plan," Remus said. "I doubt Narcissa or Lucius would pose much of a threat."

Sirius nodded in agreement. "Let's go home," Sirius said, standing up and stretching his aching body. He had been sitting still for too long.

They arrived back at Grimmauld shortly after sunset and entered in through the front door. The house was quiet, but there was a delightful smell wafting out of the kitchen. Molly had no doubt cooked a full meal for them while they were gone. "Harry?" Sirius called out, but no one answered back.

"Must be upstairs," Remus said.

They walked in a bit, passing by the door of the library. Sirius was about to keep walking when he spotted Ron sitting on the floor. He was sitting on his knees, a book open on the floor in front of him. He had his hands perched on either side of the open book, his head tilted down over it so his red hair was blocking the view of his face. It struck Sirius as odd. The way he was sitting seemed very uncomfortable, yet he was sitting so still that he looked like he'd been hit with a Body-Bind. Sirius was sure that he had never seen Ron read a book so intently.

"Ron?" Remus said softly from his place next to Sirius. Ron didn't react. They shared a confused look before Remus entered the room, walking slowly over to Ron and placing a hand on his shoulder. "Ron?" he said again.

Ron's head snapped up and Sirius got his first look at his eyes. They were stark white, but only for a second, gone so quickly that Sirius thought he imagined it. It was unnerving though, the blank face he wore staring up at Remus. After a long second, his face relaxed and he just looked confused.

"Where are the others?" Remus asked gently.

"Erm, I don't know," Ron said, shaking his head. "Think Mum's in the kitchen."

"Okay," Remus responded. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Ron said quickly, shooting up to his feet, and leaving the book open on the floor.

"You're welcome to borrow anything you find in here," Sirius said.

"Thanks," Ron said, looking supremely uncomfortable. Remus and Sirius exchanged another look before leaving Ron in the library and heading for the kitchen. They found Molly and Arthur sitting at the kitchen table, talking in quiet voices.

"Oh, you're back," Molly said. "How are you doing, Sirius?"

"I'm fine," Sirius said stiffly. He appreciated her checking in, and especially her watching Harry while they were out, but he didn't think he was in a place to accept her attention at the moment. "Where is Harry?"

"He's upstairs," Arthur said. "He said he wasn't hungry. Ginny's already gone home."

"We made some food for you," Molly said, gesturing toward the truly insane number of dishes filled with food set under warming charms.

"Thank you, Molly," Remus said kindly.

"We'll just get out of your hair then," Arthur said, standing. "Please let us know if you need anything."

"Of course," Remus said diplomatically. "Thanks again for watching Harry."

They left quietly through the floo, Ron following after them with a book in hand. Sirius wondered which one it was that had interested him so much. The moment they were alone, Sirius began to feel unsettled again. He would be inclined to believe it was just the effect Grimmauld had on him, but there was something else.

"I think we should check on Harry," Sirius said quietly. "Maybe we can convince him to eat something."

Remus nodded solemnly and together they climbed the stairs to Harry's room. However, he wasn't inside, the door was propped open and the bedroom and bathroom were empty. Remus gave him a vaguely worried look.

"You don't think he would have left, do you?" Remus said.

“ *Homenum Revelio* ,” Sirius said instantly. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the outline of Harry down in the basement. At least he was still there. They hurried down the stairs. The basement, at one point, had been used as a wine cellar and a potions lab, but it had been empty for a long while. There wasn’t any reason for him to be down there.

“Harry?” Remus called when they reached the bottom of the stairs. There was barely any light, the cellar nearly pitch black with shadows. “*Lumos*.” Once the room was lit up, they spotted Harry in the center of the cellar. He was on his hands and knees, scrubbing the dirty cellar floor with a small flannel, an old bucket sitting next to him.

“Harry, what are you doing?” Sirius said alarmed. Harry looked up at him, his eyes watery with fear as he flinched at the sound of Sirius’s voice. Sirius took two steps toward him, and Harry sat back like he had been pushed.

“Please, don’t send me back!” he shouted before crumbling under a wave of wretched sobs.

“Send you back?” Sirius asked, rushing forward. He stopped about a foot away, unsure if he should touch him or not.

“I don’t want to go back to the Dursleys. I know I don’t deserve to be here! I know that. But I can clean and cook, and I’ll do anything you want, just please let me stay here!” He was working himself up into a state of terror.

“Oh, no. No, Harry, no,” Sirius rambled, giving into the desire to wrap his arms around the boy. He pulled him tightly against his chest, Harry’s body shaking with sobs. “We would never do that. We would never send you back to those people. This is your home.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry choked out, his voice muffled against Sirius’s shoulder. “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t want anyone to die. It’s all my fault.”

Sirius shushed him gently, giving Remus a helpless look. He was overwhelmed, Harry’s grief and panic almost too much to bear alongside his own. Remus kneeled next to them and put a firm hand on Harry’s back.

“It wasn’t your fault, Harry,” Remus said. “It was an accident. You were just trying to protect Sirius, that’s not a fault. Protecting the people we care about is what sets us apart from the people who would set out to hurt us. Regulus would never hold you responsible for this.”

Harry didn’t respond, Sirius honestly didn’t think Harry could speak anymore as he devolved into wordless cries. The emotions he must have been drowning in for weeks were finally spilling out. Sirius was just glad that he could be there with them. He was especially glad that Remus was there too, he was like a steady rock that kept them both from flying off the handle.

It took a few minutes for Harry to calm down, and when he finally did, he was leaning heavily into Sirius like he was moments away from falling asleep. Sirius didn’t want him to go to bed without them talking though.

“Did you truly believe that we would give you up that easily?”

Harry nodded but didn't respond. Sirius grabbed his shoulders and pushed him back slightly so that he could look at his face. It was blotchy and wet from tears, his eyes bright green behind his slightly off-kilter glasses.

"I love you, Harry," Sirius said. "I've loved you since before you were born — since the day Lily told me she was pregnant."

"Not since the day James told you?" Remus said. Sirius noticed the smile on his lips, his eyes fond.

Sirius smiled back, then looked at Harry again. "Lily told me first," he confessed with a whisper. "She swore me to secrecy because James wanted to wait a little bit, but she always liked me best."

Harry broke out into the first real smile that Sirius had seen on his face since before Regulus died. "Really?"

Sirius nodded. "She told me 'cause she knew I would love you, and she was right. Harry, there is something... we wanted to..." He looked at Remus again. He hadn't been prepared to tell him yet, but it was starting to slip out without him meaning to. Remus smiled encouragingly and Sirius took a deep breath.

"I want to adopt you, Harry."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed. "You want to adopt me?" Harry said, sounding dazed.

"If that's something you want," Sirius said quickly. "You belong here with me, okay? That'll be true even if you don't want me to adopt you."

Harry's eyebrows raised, and he looked a bit like he might start crying. "I want you to adopt me," he said quietly.

Something loosened in Sirius's chest, and he hugged Harry again, his eyes filled with tears when he looked at Remus. Remus was crying too. Sirius reached out to grab him by the front of his shirt and pulled him in. Remus followed suit and wrapped his arms around both of them.

So much was unknown. Maybe he and Remus would never again be what they once were, but they were all together. They had Harry and they would keep him safe, would make sure he felt loved. None of them would be left alone again.

the seer.

The first time Ron felt the effects of precognition was when he was five years old. He didn't know the word for it then, he wouldn't know the word for it for many years, not until Hermione told him it. However, with the benefit of hindsight, he knew that's what happened.

Fred and George, the troublemakers that they were, had called five-year-old Ron and beacons him upstairs to their room. He was sitting in the den eating a leftover sandwich that his mum had made for Ginny. She never finished her food, and Ron never could get enough. He would usually ask for seconds, often left hungry at the end of a meal, but his mum would usually just scold him.

"Ron, come up here. We want to show you something," Fred said, leaning over the stairs to shout.

Ron stuffed the rest of the sandwich in his mouth, chewing quickly as he climbed to his feet. He had just put his first foot on the stairs when he heard it. It wasn't a voice exactly, but it was like a thought that belonged to someone else. *Make sure your dad is with you*.

"What?" he said out loud.

"I said come up here," Fred shouted. He was back inside the twins' bedroom, but the door was open so Ron could hear his muffled voice.

"Okay," Ron said. He took another step. *Get Dad*. "Why?"

"What do you mean why? Just come up here," George said, his voice impatient. He didn't understand it then, though he knew the voice wasn't coming from his brothers. He turned his head and could just barely make out his dad standing outside the front door, talking to his mum. He stumbled over to him, opening the door a crack.

"Dad," he said softly.

"Just a second, Ron," Arthur said over his shoulder. "Should we call someone out to deal with them? I don't want the gnomes to destroy the garden."

"I'm going up to Fred and George's room, okay?" Ron said. "Will you come?"

"Sure, I'll be up in a second," Arthur said distractedly. Ron nodded, feeling settled, and approached the stairs again. He climbed them a bit slowly, waiting for the warning to return, but it remained silent.

"Finally," George groaned when Ron entered their room.

"What is it?" Ron asked curiously, not quite accustomed to the suspicion he needed to survive living with Fred and George.

“Hold out your hand,” Fred said. “We just found this super wicked piece of magic.”

Ron thought about it for a second then nodded. “Okay,” he said, holding out his hand. George grabbed it like he was going to shake it, but didn’t let him go. Fred turned around and grabbed their mum’s wand off the bed. The twins were always stealing her wand when she was distracted by Ginny.

“Ready?” Fred said. Ron nodded though he didn’t know what he was supposed to be ready for. George nodded quite seriously, looking very much like a grown adult rather than a seven-year-old. The tip of the wand began to glow slightly as if it were on fire. “Okay, you have to say yes to everything, all right? Otherwise, the spell won’t work.”

Ron nodded in understanding, straightening his shoulders determinedly.

“Do you, Ron, swear to always —”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence because a moment later their father burst into the room and started shouting. Ron didn’t understand what happened until later when his father sat him down and explained what an Unbreakable Vow was. Ron was very upset when he found out what Fred and George were trying to do, crying into his father’s shoulder for a good half hour before he calmed down.

There were other instances like that one, but as he got older, the words became less clear, often replaced with a distant feeling that would float by like a small rock in a rushing stream, the blink and he’d miss it kind of feeling. It was easier to ignore and often easy to overlook as he approached his eleventh birthday. He didn’t have a full vision until his first night at Hogwarts, but again he wouldn’t recognize it for what it was until he was older.

He was exhausted after the sorting ceremony, happy that he was put with the rest of his family. He was a little worried at first that he might be sorted somewhere else, there was always a little doubt in his mind that he should be in Gryffindor, but he knew he would disappoint his parents if he was sorted into Sly—another house. So after he was sorted in Gryffindor, he happily ate plate after plate of food, feeling full for the first time in his life, and by the time he climbed into his bed, he could barely keep his eyes open.

He fell into a dark, dreamless sleep, resting peacefully for most of the night, until suddenly he was pulled into the worst nightmare he’d ever had. He was inside a yawning cave, so dark that he could barely see his fingers in front of him until a light gleamed from deep in the cave. He was squinting at it one moment and the next he was right under it. He was on an island in the center of a pitch-dark lake.

He wasn’t alone on the island. There was a very old house elf who was crying silently, his knobby hands trembling as he grasped something between them. There was also a man dressed all in black. He was lying on the ground, shaking fiercely, and slowly crawling toward the water. Ron tried to ask what was going on or where he was, but he couldn’t speak. He would open his mouth and no sound would come out.

He watched frozen as the poor, shivering man climbed into the water, dead arms shooting out to grab onto the man’s wrists. He shouted in distress at first, but the final sounds he made as

he was dragged underwater were sobs of despair. Ron woke with a cry, covered in sweat and his heart racing in his chest. He panted heavily as he tried to calm down, but the dream lingered behind his eyelids.

The next day he chalked it up to being in a new place and eating too much, but he couldn't stop the shiver that went down his spine when he remembered that last helpless sob he heard. By the time Halloween came around, he had all but forgotten it, but the sob stayed in the back of his mind, untouched and unthought of until he started Divinations in third year.

"You have a heart in the center, that's love," Ron said, looking back and forth between his book and cup with a curious look on his face. "The heart is under some kind of bridge or," Ron paused, "like an archway. That's... a new beginning or an ending. So you're going to find love or end love?" He said the final words trailing off into uncertainty.

It was the first time he'd done anything in Divination class, and Regulus easily brushed it off, but almost instantly it was tied to the sob of despair he'd heard during the nightmare in first year. He tried to shake it off, to forget it, but it stayed like an unwanted stench. However, his desire not to think about it was interrupted by Trelawney's desire to push him in class.

Ultimately, Trelawney's will won out. Ron had never received so much positive attention in his life, and now Luna was encouraging him, even if she was a bit odd while she did it, and Trelawney was trying to help him. Sure, Hermione thought he was making it up, but he didn't care. Even if he was making it up, it didn't matter, because this was something that was just his, and no one could take that away from him.

He threw himself into learning Divinations, into getting better, and soon he was looking at the dream over and over again, staring down the archway he saw in Regulus's teacup like it would give him all the answers. He began to see clearer the more he practiced, but there was always something right outside his reach.

It wasn't until the beginning of fourth year that he was first able to connect the dream to Regulus in a real way. In retrospect, he should have seen it earlier. Regulus was a completely different person than who he was pretending to be, and Ron interacted with him every day. He was so focused on the teacup that he missed the obvious message right beside him.

He wasn't mad when he first figured it out, that Regulus was much older than he claimed to be, that he might have died once, but he was mad when he realized that both Harry and Hermione knew. Neither of them bothered to tell him and that stung worse than anything else. Even Luna knew. He asked her about it, and she just replied, "Yes, of course. He's here for Harry."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked incredulously.

"You'll have to ask him. I don't think James would appreciate me telling Regulus's secrets."

"James?" Ron said questioningly. "Harry's father?"

Luna nodded seriously, and Ron stared at her confused for a long few moments. When she did not elaborate, he decided to drop it. She was always saying odd things, and he didn't feel

much like looking into that particular detail that day.

He kept trying to see clearly the message he'd encountered in Regulus's teacup that first day, even during the days when he was speaking to Regulus or Harry after their fight following the night when Harry's name came out of the Goblet of Fire, but the answer always felt out of reach. It was as if it was right in the corner of his eye, directly out of sight, but hovering close enough to catch a glimpse of it if he was only fast enough. He could never manage it.

That all changed when Trelawney was fired. He knew that Hermione, and probably the others as well, thought that she was a terrible professor. Hermione was always calling her incompetent, but she worked hard to help Ron develop his gifts so He couldn't fault her for not being perfect in classes.

Some days it seemed like Trelawney was the only one who believed him. Hermione thought he was lying, Harry and Regulus didn't seem to care, and Luna supported him but sometimes that felt like it hurt him more than helped him. Parvati and Lavender believed him as well, but he found them dreadfully boring and didn't like to spend too much time with them – he really didn't understand how Regulus was friends with them. He only tried to bring up his gifts once to his mother, but she dismissed him so quickly that he never brought it up to his family again.

He felt alone every time he tried to improve or learn, and Trelawney was the only person who tried to help him. So when she was fired by Umbridge, Ron just about gave up on Divinations altogether.

"You have a gift, dear Ron," Trelawney said to him. "I think you will find your answers, but our time looking for them together is over." Ron went right up to the dorm and closed himself in his bed curtains so that no one would know how upset he felt.

He thought it was all over, but then he met Firenze. Firenze was one of the oddest individuals Ron had ever met. He was a centaur, but he was different from the ones in the Forbidden Forest who reacted harshly to wizards and were always threatening to drag them away deep into the forest if they dared to enter – at least, according to legend. Firenze wasn't like that, but there was still mistrust there that Ron could hear in every word. He agreed to teach wizards, but he would never truly like them. The first time Ron spoke to him one-on-one, he even detected a lilt of pity in his voice.

"I've been trying to see something specific," Ron said, quickly explaining the archway he'd seen a few years ago. "I think there's more, but I've never been able to see it all."

Firenze pondered him for a long moment before turning away from Ron completely. He was staring out the large window that looked out onto the grounds of Hogwarts. The silence stretched on for so long that Ron wondered if he would ever reply. He was just beginning to contemplate leaving the office with his tail between his legs when Firenze spoke.

"There are some things that are better left unknown. Not all knowledge is a gift, Ronald Weasley."

"Oh," Ron said disappointedly. "So I can't see it?"

“That is not what I said,” Firenze said. He didn’t sound annoyed, but Ron still felt like he’d just been scolded. “But you should know, that once you have seen it, you may wish that you hadn’t.”

Ron didn't really understand that at the time. He just wanted to see it, he hated that it was hidden from him, so he responded, “I understand.”

Firenze gave him a blank look but ultimately nodded. “The most important thing to know about Divinations is that you cannot only use one type of practice if you want a complete view. This is a lesson my fellow centaurs have failed to learn, even after hundreds of years of studying the movements of the stars and planets. You saw your first clue using Tessomancy, but that does not mean the answer can be found there. Seeing comes from you, but you must use all tools at your disposal.”

“O—okay,” Ron stuttered. “What does that mean?”

“Think of it like magic,” Firenze said. “You cannot understand magic if all you learn is one subject. You will always be missing something. You must learn it all if you plan to succeed.”

“So, you’re saying that I need to learn another form of divination, but I’ve been learning other ones for months,” Ron said. He didn’t mean to sound so frustrated, but Firenze furrowed his eyebrows sharply. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“You have been learning, but you have not been looking. You may see without meaning to, but you will never *see* .”

Ron didn’t think he had ever felt stupider and that was really saying something considering he spent most of his time with Hermione and Regulus. Still, Firenze was actually a good professor, and together they started working through many of the different practices, some that he had learned with Trelawney, but many that he did not.

By Christmas, he had spent more time looking at Tarot cards, staring into mirrors, inspecting smoke patterns, cracking eggs, and observing fish, rats, mice, and stones than he had ever wanted to. He was exhausted, his mind fried beyond repair, and yet he felt like he was getting nowhere. Still, the archway he saw in Regulus’s tea leaves remained tauntingly out of reach.

He found other things — he discovered Regulus and Harry’s secret about them becoming animagi, which was just a simple ask-and-find method. His words, not anyone else’s. He didn’t understand it well enough to put it into words, and he hadn’t brought it up to Firenze, but sometimes if he just focused on the answer he needed, he would simply find it. He tried it a few times while thinking about the archway, but so far he hadn’t had any luck.

“This is useless,” Ron complained.

“You are welcome to give up,” Firenze said. He didn’t say it in a mean way, but that almost made it worse. He said it like it was a simple fact that affected no one but Ron.

“I don’t want to give up,” Ron mumbled petulantly.

Firenze sighed. "You are a Seer."

Ron gasped. It was the first time Firenze had actually said that word, had truly called him that.

"You will find some success with all practices, but there will be one that speaks to you above all else. Now, shall we move on to fire omens?" Firenze said. Ron nodded then flinched when Firenze lit a huge fire in the middle of the classroom.

Somehow it ended up being one of the last practices that gave him the answer he needed, and he didn't even discover it on purpose. He was once again feeling frustrated by his lack of progress, made worse because of the way tensions were rising. He knew that something was coming, but he couldn't tell what it was.

He was looking through his trunk for one of his books, thinking about that stupid teacup. It had been well over a year since he'd seen it, and yet it still bugged him. He kept shoving books out of the way, one after another, so lost in thought that he forgot what he was looking for.

"Just show me the answer!" he growled, impulsively grabbing *Defensive Magical Theory*, the textbook Umbridge had assigned, and throwing it against the window. It slammed against the glass and fell to the ground, opening to a random page. He glared at it for a moment before stomping over to pick it up.

It was open to a random page in chapter two: *Common Defensive Theories and their Derivation*. His eyes instantly landed on a paragraph about what derivation meant and how it could be used to understand what a defensive spell did without actually casting the spell. It was all nonsense, at least when it came to Defense Against the Dark Arts, but the more he read the paragraph, the more he realized this was the answer he was looking for.

It wasn't in divination at all, it was in the derivation of the archway itself. Where did the archway come from? He should have been looking for that the entire time. He rushed to the library, brushing past Hermione who was just leaving, her hair sticking up on all sides after she'd spent the afternoon tugging on it in frustration.

"Where are you going?" she said curiously.

"I have to find the archway," Ron said.

"Oh, that again," Hermione said, rolling her eyes and turning away. Ron tried not to let it hurt him, pushing his feelings to the side. The library was nearly empty that time of night, with only a few students here and there. If Hermione was already leaving, then it definitely was late.

He closed his eyes. "What is the archway?" he whispered. He opened his eyes without seeing, breathing deeply and allowing his body to just move. He walked into the restricted section without pausing, climbing down the stairs the moment he was inside, as he headed toward the very back of the section.

When he felt like he could see again, he was staring at a black book bound in old leather. There was no title and when he opened it, he discovered that it was written completely in Latin. He sighed frustratedly. There was no way he would be able to read this. He wasn't smart. And it wasn't like he could ask for Hermione's help without facing her judgment. There was no way he was approaching Regulus with this, not after all this time of hunting for answers in secret.

He sat down next to the bookshelf, grateful that there wasn't anyone patrolling the restricted section. He began to flip through the book halfheartedly, looking at the occasional pictures, until he flipped to one about halfway through. There it was. The archway. It was hand-drawn on the side of the page, but it was a perfect replica of what he'd seen in the tea leaves.

One second he was in the library, and the next he was in front of the archway. The real one. He looked around, but he couldn't see anything else. It was just shadows. He turned back to the arch, watching it curiously. After a few moments, someone came into view, and for the second time in his life, Ron watched Regulus Black get dragged to his death. He fell through the archway while clawing hands shot out, digging into his skin, and ripping him backward. Even if he had tried to stop, they wouldn't have let him. He heard Harry scream his name, his voice perfectly clear even though Ron couldn't see him.

Ron gasped loudly. He was back in the library, the book discarded on the ground in front of him.

"Oh, no," he whispered. "Oh, no!" he shouted.

"Who is down there?" he heard Pince yell. He scrambled to grab the book and sprinted out of the restricted section. Pince was yelling at him as he went, but he just kept running, not stopping until he made it to Firenze's office.

"Regulus is going to die!" he squeaked out the moment he was inside, a stitch in his side from running. Firenze looked at him blankly and nodded. "What? No, don't nod. He's going to die!"

"Yes, he is."

The noise that came out of Ron was the mix between a gasp and a gag. "Wh—What? You knew?" he said.

"I told you that there are some things better left unknown," Firenze said.

"No! This isn't better left unknown or whatever rubbish you're talking about. I know he's going to die, I can stop it."

Firenze frowned. "This is something else humans struggle to understand."

"What is?" Ron demanded.

"Some things cannot be changed. You must allow them to happen."

Ron shook his head. "Why?" he said.

“Come, let me show you something,” Firenze said. Ron wanted to throw a fit and leave the room, he felt so betrayed by Firenze. He couldn’t believe that he knew Regulus was going to die again, and he hadn’t said anything. He couldn’t fight his curiosity though. He walked over to Firenze’s desk – if one could even call it that. He couldn’t exactly sit behind a desk given his horse-like body, but he still had a large table that was covered in books, papers, and random devices used for divination.

He pointed to the large crystal ball in the center of the table. “Look for Regulus’s future,” Firenze instructed. Ron glared at him for a second before turning to the crystal ball. He let his eyes unfocus, slipping into the deep breathing he had been taught. He could read crystal balls in his sleep. Except now he couldn’t. There wasn’t anything.

“I don’t see anything because he’s going to die,” Ron said, his voice a mixture of glumness and anger.

Firenze hummed shortly. “Now look for your own,” he said.

Ron sighed but followed the instructions. Once again he saw nothing, there was no future, it was just dark. “What?” he breathed.

“Regulus’s death is a pivotal point, as it was last time. It must happen, but what happens afterward is left up to you.”

“What does that mean?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Firenze said. “The important thing is that Regulus must die, as he had to die before. His death is the only road to the future, you will not be able to see it until Regulus is dead.”

Those words weighed on Ron’s mind heavily as he went into each of his O.W.L.s. He tried not to look at Regulus too often, it felt like he couldn’t breathe every single time he did. It was worse when he saw Harry though. Would Harry ever forgive him if Regulus truly died and Harry found out that Ron knew ahead of time?

In the end, he couldn’t have stopped it even if he wanted to. He was instantly expunged from the fight where Regulus died, with Ron knocked out on the Department of Mystery floor. From what he heard after the fact if Regulus hadn’t died, then Sirius would have died in his place. None of that removed the guilt he felt though, especially when he arrived at Regulus’s funeral and saw how twitchy and skinny Harry looked.

They talked briefly, but Ron was too swallowed up in his feelings to be of any use to Harry. He tried lightly to encourage him to write Hermione back. He felt bad that she wasn’t invited to the funeral though he understood that it was for her own safety. Still, she had sent him no less than ten letters since they’d gone home for the summer.

The moment he was breathing in the musty air of Grimmauld Place after the funeral, he let himself sink into that hazy part of his brain that knew things he didn’t, and he let it guide him. What did he do now? Regulus was dead and Ron was in the unknown.

“Ron?” he heard someone say. It echoed like he was back in the cave where Regulus died the first time. “Ron?” This time he heard it. It was Remus speaking to him. He looked up before he could see, but his eyes slowly came into focus as he stared up at the man. He was on his knees in the library, not the best way to be found, and Remus was looking worriedly down at him. “Where are the others?”

“Erm, I don’t know,” he replied, uncertainly. “Think Mum’s in the kitchen.”

“Okay. Are you all right?” Remus said.

“Yes,” he said, suddenly worried that they would question him on what he was doing. How would they react if they knew the truth?

“You’re welcome to borrow anything you find in here,” Sirius said. Ron hadn’t noticed him at first.

“Thanks,” he replied awkwardly.

He went home that night with the book he’d found in the library, when he thought of finding it he could only remember dragging it out from underneath the bookshelf. It had been discarded there by someone. He took it up to his room before looking at it.

“*A Soul’s Match* by Alvina Ackerly,” he read quietly. Was this the answer he was looking for?

the veil part II.

Chapter Notes

merry christmas to those who celebrate. here is a surprise chapter for you. xx

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hermione cried herself to sleep every night of June after Regulus died. She kept replaying their last interaction, Regulus waking her after Death Eaters knocked her out and telling her to help the others. He put his hand on her cheek and calmed her panic in a single sentence. He had done that so many times for her since she met him in first year, and now he was gone, slipped through the veil.

Harry was a shell of himself during the final days of term. Ron seemed just as shocked and empty, Hermione didn't think he'd ever gone so many days without speaking. Ginny kept leaving to go out to the Quidditch Pitch, staying out there until well after curfew. Luna disappeared altogether, and Hermione had to find her using the map after she snuck it out of Harry's trunk. It took some searching, but she finally spotted her name down at the boathouse.

She wasn't sure what pushed her to seek Luna out, it wasn't like the two of them were close. They were barely even friends, but for some reason, she felt the need to find her and see if she was okay. Perhaps it was because it was the kind of thing Regulus would do. The thought made her sad. It always felt awkward between her and Luna, but now that Regulus was gone, it felt like Hermione needed every lifeline that she could grasp.

"Luna?" she called out when she finally made it down there. Luna was sitting near the water, her knees curled up against her chest. She looked over her shoulder when Hermione called her name.

"Oh, hello," she said softly, turning back around to gaze out over the lake.

"What are you doing down here?" Hermione asked. She walked up to her side, doing her best to pretend she didn't feel uncomfortable, and sat down, tossing her legs over the side of the boathouse so her feet hung right above the water.

"Regulus spent a great deal of time down here this year," Luna replied. "Did you know that?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, he never mentioned it."

"I don't think he would appreciate someone discovering all his potion equipment. I came down to clean it up," Luna said, her voice so quiet that it was nearly lost in the wind. Her eyes were dry, but red-rimmed like she'd been crying.

“Sometimes it felt like we never really knew him at all,” Hermione said without meaning to.

“He kept a lot of secrets,” Luna said. “But I don’t think he did it to hurt us. I think he just wanted us all to be safe.”

Hermione nodded, though she wasn’t sure if Luna noticed. She didn’t reply. It didn’t feel like there was anything left to say. Her eyes teared up again, her throat tight with sadness and regret. She wished they had never gone to the Ministry.

“Did the Aurors talk to you?” Hermione asked after a while when her emotions had settled again and she felt she could speak.

“Yes,” Luna replied. “I told them that Umbridge wanted to use the Cruciatus Curse on Regulus. They didn’t believe me.”

“They said that?” Hermione asked, startled.

“No, but I can always tell.” Luna gave her a quick look out of the corner of her eye before gazing back out at the Black Lake as if nothing happened. Hermione felt a swell of guilt, though she often didn’t believe in the ridiculous theories or creatures that Luna would discuss, she probably could have been nicer about it. Regulus would have wanted her to be nicer. She sighed quietly.

“I overheard them talking. They think that the centaurs might have done something to her,” Hermione said.

Luna hummed quietly. “That is a shame. The centaurs are already treated so poorly by wizardkind.”

“You don’t believe they were involved?” Hermione asked. All they knew was that Umbridge left Draco and Regulus at the edge of the forest and had walked in alone. She hadn’t been seen since.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Luna said. Hermione gave her a questioning look. “Umbridge told Regulus that she was the one who sent dementors after Harry.”

“Right,” Hermione said slowly, she had mentioned that to the Aurors in her own interview, but they only nodded like they already knew, “but what does that have to do with the Forbidden Forest?”

“Umbridge put Harry in danger.” Luna didn’t say anything else, and Hermione’s first instinct was to question her, to ask what she could possibly mean, but slowly, Luna’s meaning sunk in. Umbridge had confessed to sending dangerous creatures after Harry Potter because she didn’t like him. If he wasn’t already proficient at casting the Patronus Charm, he could have died or ended up soulless.

“Do you think Regulus killed her?” Hermione whispered, she worried that if she spoke the words any louder someone might overhear even though they were completely alone.

“Yes,” Luna said simply. Hermione gasped quietly. She felt like she should dismiss it as a possibility outright, but as the seconds passed, it started to make more sense. She wondered if Draco knew. Would he tell anyone? Why had he lied to begin with? Although it wasn’t like the Aurors could do anything to Regulus now, even if Umbridge was indeed dead somewhere in the Forbidden Forest.

The train ride back to London was deadly silent. Harry was headed back to the Dursleys since Sirius had been arrested with the other Death Eaters at the Ministry that night and just being around him felt like all the air was being sucked out of the room. He looked terrible and she knew it would only get worse now that he was going back to his muggle family.

Her parents picked her up from King’s Cross, greeting her cheerfully until they took in her appearance.

“What happened, honey?” her mother asked gently. Hermione just shook her head. There was no way to explain that would put her parents at ease, and she didn’t want to risk them pulling her out of school when they found out one of her fellow students had died.

She wrote to Harry and Ron the moment she was home, sending out letters to Ginny, Luna, and Neville as well when she realized they had barely spoken near the end of the year. No one responded to her except for Luna. Hermione was a bit surprised, but was pleased to find that she’d written a four-page letter filled with her favorite memories of Regulus. The letter was nearly illegible by the time Hermione finished reading it, her tears destroying the carefully written letters on the page. She responded with her own letter a few days later.

Ron sent her a quick note a few weeks into summer to tell her about the funeral. Hermione wasn’t allowed to attend, Dumbledore said it was too dangerous. She wrote to Luna about that too, complaining about being left out and explaining how lonely she felt. Sometimes it felt like she wouldn’t have had friends at all if it wasn’t because of Regulus. Luna assured her that wasn’t true when she wrote back, but Hermione couldn’t shake the feeling.

Her parents were worried about her as she spent most days closed up in her room, but she refused to talk to them. Maybe one day she would explain, but she couldn’t bear to talk about it yet. She thought the rest of the summer would end up the same way, lonely and isolated except for the few letters from Luna, an unlikely friend in a time of grief, but two days into July, Harry finally wrote back.

Hermione,

I’m sorry I haven’t responded. Don’t take it personally, I haven’t responded to anyone. Sirius has been freed, I don’t know if you already saw, but they released him. He says he wants to adopt me. Can you believe it?

Anyway, we had Regulus’s funeral. I’m sorry you couldn’t be there, but you didn’t miss much. Fleur was there though. Did you know that she and Bill are dating now? How weird is that? I’ve been living at Grimmauld for a while now, but it’s hard being here without Regulus. You should come and visit if you get the chance.

Harry

Hermione had not been keeping up with the news about Sirius, but she was relieved to hear that he was freed. It was a shame that Regulus wasn't here to see it. She wrote Harry back quickly, sending the letter off with Nyx, Regulus's owl.

On the morning of the fifth, Regulus's birthday, Luna showed up at her front door with her father, Xenophilous, in tow.

"Dad is going to take me to see Harry," she said. "I thought you might want to come."

Hermione gasped, tears springing to her eyes, and hugged Luna before she could second guess it. She pulled back a beat later feeling embarrassed, but Luna just smiled kindly. She quickly went to tell her parents that she was going to visit Harry, and though they had some questions, mostly for Xenophilous who just seemed confused, they let her leave with next to no fuss. They were more than used to sending her off to the wizarding world by now.

Though she was glad to finally be with her friends at Grimmauld, the day was mournful. They arrived during breakfast. Harry looked thinner than the last time she saw him. He got up to greet her with his plate still mostly full, and though he made like he was going to leave it, Sirius gently nudged him back toward the table and encouraged him to eat the rest. It felt like a private moment so she left them to it, opting instead to head toward the living room where she found Arthur, Molly, and Ginny.

"Where is Ron?" she asked after greeting them.

"He went to the library," Ginny replied before following her parents into the kitchen. Sure enough, Hermione found Ron in the library browsing the books. It was the place she thought most unlikely to find him, but there he was, and when she asked about what he was doing, he brushed her off. She knew he was lying about something, but given what day it was, she decided not to push it. He would tell her eventually.

Remus took her home that night, apparating her straight to her front doorstep.

"Feel free to come over anytime," he said. "I know Harry appreciates you visiting."

"Thank you, Remus," Hermione said. She spent the next few days alone, despite the invitation. Grimmauld felt so wrong without Regulus's presence. She missed him dreadfully, and it felt like the entire house was empty without him there.

On the morning of the thirteenth, Hermione received her O.W.L. results in the mail. She instantly sent an owl to Harry asking if she could come over — it was only polite — and was pleasantly surprised when Remus showed up to take her there.

"Did you both get your results?" she said when she entered the kitchen. Harry and Ron were already sitting around the table with empty plates, the last remnants of whatever they'd had for breakfast. Harry nodded.

"Yep," Ron said grimly, holding up his unopened letter. Hermione wondered if he was nervous to see his scores before her eyes drifted to another set of results in the center of the table. On the front of the envelope was Regulus's name.

“They still sent them?” Hermione asked.

“They sent them to me,” Sirius said. He looked vaguely sick like he might keel over. “I don’t know why. I guess they thought I’d want to see how well he did.” He coughed suddenly and looked away from the three of them.

No one spoke for a long few moments, the silence tense with unasked questions and unspeakable grief. Hermione couldn’t drag her eyes away from the results, curiosity tugging at her. She knew that Regulus had taken all twelve O.W.L.s, though why he felt the need to she didn’t know, but there was something so grotesque about that representation of the future he would never get to have sitting on the table in front of her.

“I’ll leave you guys to it,” Sirius stiffly and fled the room. Hermione only glanced at him for a second as he left, her eyes drifting back to the O.W.L. results.

“Do you think we should open it?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I... I want to know how he did.” He looked like he was a moment away from crying, a feeling Hermione shared.

“Do you want to do it?” Hermione asked. Harry shook his head.

“No, you do it,” he replied quietly.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s open ours first.”

Ron and Harry nodded and together the three of them opened their O.W.L. results. Hermione felt a surge of disappointment. She had taken ten O.W.L.s and had expected to do well in every single one. She spent months, if not years, preparing for them, and it still wasn’t good enough.

“Damn it,” she whispered.

“What? Did you get one E?” Ron said jokingly.

“Yes,” she said with grave disappointment. “In Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Oh, I got an O in that class,” Harry replied.

“Well, you don’t need to rub it in,” Hermione snapped. Harry and Ron laughed and though she thought she usually would be insulted and irritated by their dismissal, she was so relieved to see a smile on Harry’s face, that she found herself mimicking it. “Whatever,” she mumbled.

Their laughter died as they both seemed to remember Regulus’s results. Hermione took a deep breath and grabbed the envelope, tearing it open quickly. It was better to just get it over with.

Ordinary Wizarding Level Results

Pass Grades

Outstanding (O)

Exceeds Expectations (E)

Acceptable (A)

Fail Grades

Poor (P)

Dreadful (D)

Troll (T)

Regulus Arcturus Black III has received:

Ancient Runes: O

Arithmancy: E

Astronomy: O

Care of Magical Creatures: E

Charms: O

Defense Against the Dark Arts: E

Divination: A

Herbology: O

History of Magic: E

Muggle Studies: O

Potions: O

Transfiguration: O

Hermione read them all aloud slowly, her eyes widening each time Regulus received another passing grade. “Wow, he got all twelve,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, he got more than you, Hermione,” Ron said with a watery grin.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Yes, well, he is a lot older than I am,” Hermione said. Ron and Harry burst out laughing, and slowly Hermione found herself joining them.

A few days after that, Hermione decided to move into Grimmauld Place for the rest of the summer. She couldn't stand being home with her parents any longer since she didn't feel comfortable talking about Regulus's death. Her parents were a bit upset by it, she knew they missed her during the school year, but she just felt too isolated with them. She loved her parents, but she didn't feel like she belonged at home with them anymore.

Though Grimmauld still held its own loneliness, Hermione found it comforting. She would spend most of the day alone, Sirius, Remus, and Harry not very interested in talking, she knew that her grief was understood. She didn't have to explain who Regulus was or what his death meant to her, because everyone in the house understood it too. Probably better than she did.

She sent a quick owl off to Luna to tell her, and Luna replied right away saying that she thought it was a good idea. "I think you being around will help everyone feel better," Luna wrote. Hermione teared up a bit reading it, adding the letter to all the other ones she'd received from Luna that summer.

Ron was a frequent visitor at Grimmauld as well, however, he started acting increasingly odd as the hot days of July passed. While Harry was usually shut up in his room, or more likely, in Regulus's room, Ron would disappear for hours altogether. About a week from the end of July, Hermione decided that she needed to find out what he was doing.

They ate breakfast together that morning, Hermione pretending not to notice that Sirius was nudging Harry to eat more as each day progressed, and then they each retired to different rooms of the house just as Ron came through the floo from his house.

"Morning," he said before stuffing a half-eaten muffin into his mouth. Hermione nodded at him, and pretending to go into the library, she shut the door so that it was left open only a sliver and listened carefully as Ron climbed the stairs. She tiptoed out to follow him. Remus was in the living room and gave her a passing glance but thankfully didn't question what she was doing.

Sirius was down in the basement, though she wasn't sure what he was doing down there. Harry was in Regulus's room again. He had the door closed though so she snuck past without an issue. Ron was on the floor above, she could hear his footsteps as he snuck around. She crept up quickly, trying to move as silently as possible. It took her a moment to figure out what room he was in at first, as all the doors were closed, but then she heard a tiny creak behind one of them.

She burst into the room without thinking, slamming the door open. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

Ron jumped in surprise and spun around so quickly that he almost fell over. He was digging around in the bedside table of what she now realized was Sirius's bedroom. He had his hand tucked behind his back as he stared at her like a deer in headlights.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Did you follow me up here?"

“Yes,” she said. He shushed her frantically, and she rolled her eyes, shutting the door softly so they wouldn’t be overheard. “Are you stealing from Sirius?”

“No!” Ron said.

“Then what’s in your hand?”

“It’s nothing,” he said, looking away from her.

“Just tell me,” she pleaded.

Ron gave her a calculating look. “Okay, but you can’t tell anyone. Not Sirius *or* Harry.”

She narrowed her eyes, considering him, but ultimately agreed with a quiet, “Fine.”

He pulled his hand around and opened his fingers to reveal a small stone sitting in the middle of his palm. It was black and angular, but it had a sheen to it that made it look peculiar.

“What is that?” she asked, taking a step forward.

“I don’t know, but…”

“But?” she said, looking away from the stone to find him watching her with a deep frown on his lips.

“I think,” he whispered, “that I can use this to bring Regulus back.”

“What?!” she yelled. He jumped forward and covered her mouth with his hand.

“Stop, I don’t want them to hear us,” Ron said. “I don’t want Harry or Sirius to find out in case it doesn’t work.”

“What are you talking about?” she hissed, grabbing his wrist to remove his hand from her face.

“I had a vision —”

“Oh, honestly,” she huffed, dropping his wrist and turning away.

“You know what, forget it,” he said. He brushed past her and stomped out of the room before she could stop him. She tried to follow him downstairs, but by the time she reached the living room, he had traveled through the floo.

“Is something going on?” Remus asked, raising his eyebrows questioningly. Hermione debated telling him what she had seen but opted against it. She didn’t know what Ron was doing, but it felt wrong to tell on him.

“It’s nothing,” Hermione said quickly and walked back to the library, falling heavily into one of the old chairs. She found Ron’s obsession with divination so frustrating. It was all

nonsense, and it just felt like Ron was only interested in it because Trelawney told her that she wasn't good at it. It felt like he was trying to annoy her with it.

However, as the hours ticked by and Ron didn't return, Hermione began to feel bad. If she could find some hope of Regulus returning, wouldn't she invest her time in it? Wouldn't she do anything to bring him back?

The next day, right after breakfast, Hermione went to the Weasleys' home and found Ron reading in his bedroom.

"Come to yell at me?" he said snidely. She crossed her arms defensively but didn't bite back. She came into his room fully, shutting the door behind her, and sat down on the bed beside him. Her stomach flipped uncomfortably. She'd never felt embarrassed to be alone with him before, but she couldn't deny the slight nervousness she felt sitting on his bed now. She pushed away the feeling though. There were more important things.

"Tell me about your idea."

Ron must have been waiting for the opportunity because it took very little prodding for him to explain the bizarre soulmate book he'd found in Grimmauld. It looked like something she would find in Lavender's trunk, how it ended up under a bookshelf in the Black family library, she had no idea. It also seemed like a pile of balderdash, but she bit her tongue and didn't say so out loud. He showed her a chapter that had to do with soulmates, mentioning people being called to the veil after their so-called soulmate died, often walking into it, straight to their death.

"You think Regulus was called by his soulmate?" Hermione asked, uncertainly. She tried to keep the judgment out of her voice, but by the way, Ron frowned, she didn't think she succeeded.

"No," Ron said. "He fell in trying to save Sirius, but this book mentions the veil like it's a place that holds the dead."

"Like a doorway," Hermione said softly.

Ron nodded. "Exactly," he said. "I found a spell that can open magically sealed doorways in the Black library, it uses a bunch of runes that I've never seen before, but I think it might work."

"Wow," Hermione said, grabbing the other book out of his hand. It was a very old handwritten grimoire that was full of runes and rituals that had mostly likely been forgotten or never known by most wizard society. "This is amazing."

Ron chuckled softly. "I should have known that would be what you cared about," he said, the fondness in his voice softening any insult she might have felt.

"This is really complicated," she said, looking over the ritual.

"I know, but it's mostly just drawing the runes, so I think I could manage it."

“And the stone?”

Ron paused, looking down at his hands as he picked at his nails. There was dirt under most of them, probably from working out in the gardens. His hands had grown so much recently, she realized. They looked bigger than the last time she looked at them. Or had she ever really looked at them? Krum also had large hands, something she found distracting as they danced together at Yule Ball. Ron’s were different though, there was delicateness to them, a softness that couldn’t be found in Krum.

“It called to me,” he whispered, his voice jolting her out of her momentary distraction. Honestly, what was wrong with her? Obsessing over Ron’s hands when they were having such a serious conversation.

“It called to you?” she asked gently.

He nodded. “Like when I discovered that Harry and Regulus were becoming animagi. I knew something was hidden, and I found it.”

It was the divination thing again, but she chose not to point that out. To her, this all sounded so ridiculous, but then again, he *did* manage to find the animagi stuff. Maybe, just maybe, there was something to it. Probably not. But maybe. She’d forgotten about their animagi preparations. They hadn’t worked on that in months, too bogged down by O.W.L.s and Regulus’s death.

“How do you think the stone is going to help?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even really know what it is,” Ron admitted. “I don’t like holding it though. It makes me feel weird.”

Hermione hummed curiously. “Can I take a look at it?”

“Sure,” Ron said. He got up to grab a box from underneath his bed, pulling out a piece of bright orange fabric and placing it into her hand. She unwrapped it and found the stone bundled inside. It didn’t make her feel weird, it didn’t make her feel anything at all, but she still decided not to touch it. It was obviously a magical object, just based on its appearance, but what it was, she didn’t know.

“Why did Sirius have this?”

“I don’t know,” Ron answered, sitting back down next to her. Their knees knocked together briefly and Hermione tensed instinctively. “But it was in a box with an old ring that had been cracked in half.

“Don’t you think he might notice that it’s missing?” Hermione said.

“Maybe,” Ron said. “But I’m hoping to bring back Regulus first so that he won’t be too mad.”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh. It was such a Ron response to a problem. She shook her head slightly. “When are you going to do this ritual? I mean, you’ll have to go back to the

Department of Mysteries again. You might not even be able to get in.”

“I don’t know. Soon, I hope.”

Soon came quicker than Hermione expected. It was the thirty-first of July, Harry’s birthday, and Hermione was sitting at the kitchen table while Remus carried in a huge birthday cake with sixteen candles poked into it.

“Why sixteen candles?” Sirius asked.

“‘Cause he’s turning sixteen,” Remus said.

“Oh, right,” Sirius muttered. “Must be a muggle thing.” Remus gave him an odd look before placing the cake in front of Harry. It was a small gathering, but it was still nice to be able to celebrate Harry’s birthday with him.

After the cake was cut, Harry began opening presents. About halfway through the pile, Kreacher popped into existence at the other end of the room.

“Master,” he greeted. Sirius’s body froze like he’d been hit with a spell, then he turned to look at Remus with a wild look in his eyes. Remus nodded to the hallway and the two of them walked out of the room with Kreacher in tow.

“What do you suppose that was about?” Fred said with a smirk.

“Only one way to find out,” George whispered back.

“No, boys, leave them alone,” Molly said. The group devolved into playful arguing for a moment before Remus reentered the room looking worried.

“Molly, Arthur, would you mind staying here for a bit? Sirius and I need to run a quick errand.”

Molly nodded, looking vaguely concerned.

“Harry,” Remus said gently. “We’ll be back soon. I’m sorry to interrupt your birthday.”

“It’s fine,” Harry mumbled, looking embarrassed at being singled out. Remus squeezed his shoulder and left. Harry put his presents to the side, announcing that he was going to wait to open the rest until Remus and Sirius got back.

They settled into various conversations and Hermione was in the middle of talking to Ginny about her upcoming classes when Ron elbowed her. She gave him a questioning look and he quickly darted his eyes to the door. She nodded in understanding and watched him slip out of the room. She went back to talking to Ginny for a few more minutes so that no one would get suspicious, and when Ginny was drawn into a conversation with Luna, Hermione stood up quickly and left the room.

She found Ron in the living room waiting by the floo. “You want to do this now?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes,” he said quickly. “I have to do it now.”

Hermione’s heart began to race but she nodded. “Okay, okay, let me just get something and we’ll go.” She left him in the living room as she ran up to her bedroom to grab her wand and the objects needed for the ritual. It wasn’t much, just a few potion ingredients that she found in the basement of Grimmauld and a set of magical chalk that was used to write runes on the ground. She sprinted back downstairs and together she and Ron flooded to the Ministry.

It was late in the day thankfully since Harry’s birthday was on a Tuesday and the Ministry could have easily been filled with employees. There was a guard posted in the atrium, and Hermione felt momentarily nervous, before Ron walked up confidently and handed over his wand.

“I’m here to visit my father, Arthur Weasley, in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office,” Ron said. The guard nodded, checking Ron’s wand and then giving Ron a visitor’s badge. He did the same with Hermione, giving her a small grin before sending them off.

“That was easy,” Hermione mumbled as they walked up to the lifts.

“Let’s hope the rest of it goes as easily,” Ron replied quietly just as a lift opened.

“What do you guys think you’re doing?” Harry hissed at them suddenly. Hermione jumped in shock and Ron turned around looking white-faced. Harry was behind them, seething angrily.

“My dad sent me to get something from his office,” Ron lied quickly. “We were coming right back.” He spun back around and scampered into the waiting lift. Hermione squeaked and followed him. Harry looked completely unconvinced and jumped into the lift as well just as the doors were closing.

“I know you’re lying,” Harry said angrily. “You’ve been sneaking around all summer. What do you think you’re doing here?”

Hermione looked between them anxiously. Ron hadn’t pressed a button yet when Harry entered, so though the doors were closed, the lift hadn’t moved. Hermione took a steadying breath. “We’re here to try and revive Regulus,” Hermione said, speaking as confidently as she could manage. She leaned over and, without breaking eye contact, pressed the button for level nine.

Harry’s mouth dropped open, but the angry look in his eyes only grew. “What the hell are you two talking about?”

Ron straightened his shoulders. “I found a way to open the veil,” he said. “I think,” he added. “And Hermione is here to help me.”

“No!” Harry shouted. “Are you two crazy? Have you two lost your minds? Don’t you remember what happened last time we went to the Department of Mysteries?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “That’s exactly why we’re here.”

“I won’t let you do this,” Harry snarled.

“You can’t stop us,” Ron said sharply. Harry glared at him, but the anger quickly faltered into desperation.

“Please, don’t do this,” Harry said. “Last time we were here — Regulus died because I couldn’t wait... because I made a rash decision. Please, I don’t think you’ve thought this through.”

“Harry,” Hermione said sadly.

“You don’t have to come with us,” Ron said firmly.

“Ron,” Hermione chastised.

“I’m going in there with or without your help,” Ron said. The doors opened to the empty corridor that led to the Department of Mysteries, and Harry paled even further. Hermione took a step toward him and squeezed his hand tightly.

“You don’t have to come with us,” Hermione said. Harry squeezed her hand back but stayed looking at the corridor. She wondered how many times he’d had nightmares about this place, how it must have haunted him.

“No, I’m going with you,” Harry whispered.

Ron led the way into the circular room. She couldn’t believe that it was still unlocked, it felt wrong that it should be so easy for them to walk in. Wasn’t there any security in this place? None of the doors bore the markings that they’d placed on them last time so they had to try a few of them before finally opening the one that led to the room with the veil.

“It’s called the death chamber,” Ron said. “There are rumors that the entire Ministry was built around this one spot.”

“Where did you learn that?” Hermione asked, following him down toward the veil.

“In a book I stole from the restricted section,” he replied. “It’s one of the only parts of the Department of Mysteries that the public knows about. Probably because it’s so old.”

Hermione nodded. They had arrived right in front of the veil, and she felt her palms grow sweaty. She hadn’t watched Regulus die, but knowing this was where it happened affected her all the same. She turned to look at Harry to find that he had only walked halfway to the veil from the door. He was staring at it with wide, terror-filled eyes.

“Are you okay?” she asked, walking back to stand next to him.

“Can you hear the whispering?” he said.

“No, I don’t hear anything,” Hermione responded, concerned.

“It’s a common effect,” Ron said. Hermione looked at him with surprise. She had never been in a position where one of her friends knew more about a topic than she did, especially not Ron. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “You can wait back here if you want,” she said to Harry.

“No, I’m okay,” he said and slowly walked up to the veil.

“Okay, let’s get started,” Ron said, rubbing his hands together.

Hermione only brought two pairs of chalk, so she and Ron began drawing a replica of the runes he’d found, making a wide circle around the archway. Harry watched them and periodically grabbed the potion ingredients from Hermione’s bag to place them where she and Ron directed. She’d never used potion ingredients in this way, without mixing them or adapting them. It felt like they were almost just for show. She also didn’t recognize more than half of the runes she’d drawn. She was anxious to look them up later, especially if this worked. *Please let this work*.

“Now what?” Harry asked once they finished. Ron was silent, looking at the runes worriedly. “Well?” A terrible realization dawned on Harry’s face. “You don’t know, do you?”

“This was all I found,” Ron said quietly. Hermione looked back at the book he’d brought, but he was right, all it said was how to draw the runes. What happened next?

Harry turned away from them, grabbing onto the ends of his hair in frustration. When he turned back around, he had tears in his eyes. “Why did you both insist on doing this?” he asked, desperation punching through with every word. Ron flinched.

“I had to try something,” Ron said pleadingly, his voice breaking slightly.

“Ron,” she said quietly. “What about the stone?” He reached into his pocket and tossed it at her haphazardly. He looked like he’d already given up though, like the stone didn’t matter at all. She held it in her hand, dropping the piece of cloth that it was wrapped in, realizing only now that it was a ripped piece of a Chudley Cannons shirt, and finally touching the stone for the first time.

She wished she had researched more, had looked into what the stone did, or had just given in and asked Sirius what it was. Maybe they could leave and come back. She looked up at Ron and Harry, but Ron had walked over to one of the large stones and sat down, his head buried in his hands. Harry was sitting as well, though on the floor in front of the veil, staring up at it unhappily.

The room was heavy with misery and hopelessness. It felt like they were losing Regulus all over again. She hadn’t even realized how much she hoped this would work, even though she didn’t believe it at first. She just wanted to think that Regulus could come back to them, that somehow Ron would be right. But he was gone. Regulus was dead.

She looked at the stone again, rolling it in her palm thoughtfully. Would Sirius and Remus be mad at them for leaving the house? Probably. They would probably make Hermione go back to her parents when they found out she was involved. She sighed quietly. Her chest felt hollow.

“ *Give it to me* ,” she heard a woman whisper, her voice like silk. She looked up at the veil, startled, but of course, there was nothing there but an empty arch. Give it to her? Give what to her? She looked at the runes again, unactivated and unused, then back at the stone. Give her the stone?

This is crazy. The thought came before she even consciously understood what she was going to do. Yes, she thought, it was crazy. But Ron said the stone was important. He said that he was led to it. What if it was true? She looked over at him. His shoulders were shaking softly like he was crying. This was just as important to him as it was to her.

For some reason, it reminded her of the first time she learned that she was a witch when so many of her childhood experiences finally made sense. Magic explained it all. She’d realized for the first time that with magic, anything could be possible. When did she grow to be so cynical about it then? Why had she dismissed so many things with magic since?

She looked at the stone one final time. Anything was possible, she argued. Later, when her friends asked what in Merlin’s name she was thinking, she would shrug and say there was a reason the hat put her in Gryffindor, but in the moment, the only thing she was thinking about was the *possibility* .

She bawled her fist around the stone, and without a second thought, threw the stone straight through the veil.

“What was that?” Harry yelled in shock, jumping to his feet.

The effect was instant. The veil, which was invisible to the naked eye, appeared like a sheer white sheet, flowing in the wind. As she watched, red began to spread across it like someone was bleeding, dripping blood onto the floor as they slowly died. The runes activated at once, beginning to glow slightly as the potion ingredients vanished into thin air.

“What did you do?” Ron asked frantically. Harry had taken a few steps back to stand next to her.

“I —” A loud cracking noise interrupted her. All three of them looked up at the same time to see the black ceiling of the death chamber begin to fracture.

“We have to get out of here!” Harry shouted. Hermione looked at the veil one last time, watching as the red enveloped the white and slowly began to turn an inky black like oil dripped on the concrete beneath a car.

“Come on,” Ron said in her ear, grabbing her wrist to pull her out of the room. Right before she turned to run, the very top of the archway broke clean in half.

They tried to run as quickly as they could, but broken pieces of stone had begun falling from the ceiling, and right before she reached the door, one hit her directly on the back of her head and everything went dark.

i know it's another cliffhanger, but i couldn't resist.

thank you to everyone who has read this fic this year. i can't believe it's gotten this much attention, and i'm so happy that people are enjoying the story i've been obsessing over.

the maw.

Chapter Notes

cw: gore, minor character death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Mistress Bellatrix is at Malfoy Manor without the Dark Lord,” Kreacher croaked once they left the kitchen, the door silenced behind them with a quick spell.

“Oh,” Remus breathed.

“Who else is there?” Sirius asked, adrenaline already beginning to flood through his veins.

“Sirius, this isn’t the right time for this,” Remus said quietly. Sirius shot him a glare.

“Then stay here,” Sirius responded sharply.

Remus flinched slightly. “What about Harry’s birthday party?”

“Harry will understand,” Sirius said grimly. “I won’t be long.”

Remus sighed heavily. “I’m not letting you go on your own. Just give me a moment,” he said. He walked back into the kitchen, and Sirius took the moment to inspect Kreacher. He looked a bit better than the last time Sirius had seen him. He wasn’t as covered in wounds, and he looked like he was back to his disdainful self, the weepiness gone for now.

Kreacher was quick to explain to him who else was in Malfoy Manor. Narcissa, Lucius, and Draco, that was it. There must have been something going on with the Death Eaters if Voldemort had left. Why Lucius and Bellatrix stayed behind Sirius couldn’t fathom. Were there other Death Eaters that he was conferring with? Surely not all of them had been arrested at the Department of Mysteries.

“Go and grab Harry’s invisibility cloak,” Sirius whispered to Kreacher who disappeared without replying. He came back a second later and handed over the invisibility cloak. It was silky in Sirius’s hands, the feel of it familiar in the same way a knife might be after one had been stabbed by it. He had so many good memories attached to it, so many nights sneaking around Hogwarts with James, both of them giddy with the prospect of breaking the rules and exploring places that no one else got to see.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Remus said when he came back, pulling Sirius from his lamenting. He had a determined look on his face that would have made Sirius pant and beg on his knees under different circumstances. He would have to store the memory of it away for later.

“Kreacher. Apparate us into an empty room.”

“Yes, Master,” Kreacher responded, reaching out two wrinkly hands. Remus and Sirius looked at each other as he apparated them away. They were headed right into danger with barely a moment’s notice. It felt like a usual occurrence for Sirius, similar to how he felt during the first war, but the fact that Remus was next to him this time brought a feeling of solace and comfort.

They arrived in an empty bedroom. It looked like the Slytherin common room threw up all over it. The walls and the curtains were green, and the bed looked black, but upon closer inspection, it was also green, even the chairs were green. Honestly, it was an eyesore. Even Regulus in his childhood, when he used to worship Slytherin house, would have been repulsed by it.

The room itself was immaculate. The bed was made so neatly that it looked like it had never been slept in. Not a spec of dirt or dust could be seen with the naked eye. It barely looked lived in. The only thing out of the ordinary was the fact that all three of the windows that looked out over the Malfoy Manor grounds were cracked like someone had thrown a fit and crashed up against them trying to escape. None of them were fully broken, whoever had done it hadn’t made it out, but all of them were damaged.

“Whose room is this?” Sirius whispered.

“Master Draco’s,” Kreacher responded.

“You brought us to Draco’s room?” Sirius hissed. An entire manor full of presumably empty rooms, and Kreacher brought them to one of the few that was inhabited.

“Master did not specify. Only told Kreacher to bring him to an empty room and Kreacher did.”

Sirius rolled his eyes in frustration and was about to bite back when Remus interrupted. “We should hurry in case Voldemort comes back.”

“Right,” Sirius said, nodding. “Kreacher, leave us. When we call for you, come and apparate us out. Even if Remus is the one to call, answer him. Do you understand?”

“Kreacher understands,” Kreacher said with a bow.

“And if Voldemort returns to the property, come and find us immediately.”

“Yes, Master,” he said before disappearing.

“Where should we check first?” Remus asked.

“I’m not sure,” Sirius said, pulling out the invisibility cloak. “We both won’t fit under this, so I think you should use it. I’ll use a disillusionment charm.”

“No,” Remus said sharply. “You use it.”

“Remus —”

“No, Sirius,” Remus said. “You need it more than I do.”

“What does that mean?”

Remus released a sharp sigh. “If something happens to me, then Harry will still have a home, but if you die then he’ll just end up back with the Dursleys.”

“What?” Sirius said harshly.

“We don’t have time to argue about it now,” Remus said, already brushing him off. “Put on the cloak and let’s get this done.” He cast a quick disillusionment charm on himself and started heading toward the door. Sirius bristled unhappily, but put the cloak on as Remus requested.

Sirius had never been to Malfoy Manor. He wasn’t invited to Narcissa and Lucius’s wedding, already estranged from the family by that point. Not that he would have had any interest in attending had he been given the chance. The manor was massive, the corridors alone were wider than the ones at Hogwarts. The Malfoy family was stupidly wealthy, not wealthier than the Black family, but it was close.

Sirius would never understand why his family insisted on having their ancestral home in the middle of a city, built into a tight, dark space. There were other Black properties that resembled Malfoy Manor, but the Black family was often more interested in acquiring a lot of medium-sized properties rather than one giant one. Malfoy Manor was closer to a castle than anything.

He found himself thinking of Draco as they wandered the silent halls. He didn’t know much about Narcissa’s kid other than the fact that Harry and his friends hated him. It didn’t surprise him that Draco would act like a prat given who his father was, but he found himself feeling a bit sorry for the kid. It had to be lonely growing up in a big empty manor, with no siblings and barely any family to contend with. He probably barely interacted with other kids his age before attending Hogwarts.

It made him think of Regulus when he was little before Hogwarts destroyed their relationship. He was so soft and so quiet, skirting around his parents like he could avoid being hurt if he was invisible. He would hide in any room he could find when he was scared, and if he ever got in trouble, he would withdraw into himself so far that it was impossible to find him on the surface.

Sirius had tried so hard to protect him when they were children, taking punishments so that Regulus wouldn’t have to and watching out for him when they would interact with extended family members. That all changed when they went to Hogwarts when their relationship began to fracture and deteriorate. At the time, he thought Regulus was just as horrible as his family, but now he knew that Regulus was just trying to survive. He chose a route that Sirius wouldn’t have been able to manage, but he didn’t do it to hurt Sirius.

If only things had been different, if only he'd had the time to make it up to him, to show that Hogwarts houses didn't matter, that their parents' opinions didn't matter. Sirius still loved Regulus, even when he became a Death Eater, even when they hadn't spoken in years. Sirius was too damaged when they reconnected to understand the feelings he felt for his little brother, the desire to be close again, to be friends. He wished he had protected him back when they were teenagers. He wished he could have protected him again in adulthood.

He didn't realize that he was crying until an invisible Remus reached out and grabbed his shoulder through the cloak. He wondered if Remus could see him through it, or sense him somehow with his werewolf senses.

"Okay?" Remus whispered.

"Yeah," Sirius responded, just as quietly, wiping his face and shaking off the thoughts.

"I think I hear something up ahead," Remus said. Sirius could just make out the creak of the floorboard as Remus walked forward. Remus whispered a spell and suddenly both of their feet were silent.

"You cannot allow him to do this," Narcissa's voice cut through the silence as they approached a door that was cracked open.

"What would you have me do instead?" Lucius responded, stiff and morose. "Tell him no?" He said it sarcastically.

"We could have left," Narcissa hissed bitterly. "We should have already gone."

"It's too late for that. I failed to get the prophecy for him, and he has demanded this in return. We are lucky that it isn't worse."

"How could it be worse than this?"

"It would have happened either way. It is only a bit early."

"I never wanted this for him, Lucius. I thought this was over."

Lucius sighed. "He has no other choice."

"He's only a boy," Narcissa responded after a long moment of silence.

"He is nearly a man."

Narcissa made a sharp sound between her teeth. "I will never forgive you for this."

Remus and Sirius barely had time to step out of the way as Narcissa came barreling out through the door and stomped down the hallway, her heels clicking against the floor so loudly that they echoed. Lucius watched her go, sitting heavily into a chair behind a large, ornate desk. He rubbed his eyes tiredly. Sirius didn't think that he'd ever seen Lucius look so awful. He had facial hair growing in patches and dark circles under his eyes that made it look like he'd recently lost a fistfight.

Remus touched him lightly through the cloak again and together they began moving down the hallway in the opposite direction of where Narcissa had gone. He wondered what they had been talking about, what was happening to Draco, but they didn't have time to worry about it now.

It felt like they walked down various nearly identical corridors for an hour before they found someone else. Unfortunately, it wasn't Bellatrix, but Draco that they happened upon. He was inside a small library. It had to be one of their extra ones, Sirius doubted that the Malfoy library was this tiny. He was curled up next to a large window, his white blonde hair nearly reflective in the setting sun. It took Sirius a moment to notice that he was crying, silent tears running down his face.

He looked remarkably like Narcissa, though there were elements of his father there, it was Narcissa's face that looked through him. Every couple of seconds he would hiccup or gasp like he was coming down from sobbing. Sirius took a step toward him without meaning to, and Draco's head snapped around like he could hear him. There was no way he could, their feet were still silenced.

"Who's there?" Draco said, his voice faltering slightly, decorated with fear. As he stared at him, Draco's face seemed to change. Only slightly, but enough that he could see it. It was like he was transforming little by little, his face growing sharp and his eyes getting brighter.

Sirius took a very slow step back out of the room, and without looking for Remus, began heading away. Draco luckily didn't follow them, and he didn't call out. How had he managed to notice him? It seemed impossible.

They walked for another few minutes before making it to another bedroom, this one was messy and disorganized, the door to the room wide open.

"Remember what Regulus said, about Bellatrix having one of the Horcruxes?" Sirius asked.

"You think she'd keep it here?"

Sirius shrugged, even though Remus couldn't see him. "Worth a try," he responded, stepping into the bedroom.

"Is this her room?" Remus asked.

"I think so. She was always the messiest one of us," Sirius responded. Remus snorted softly. He was no doubt thinking about how messy Sirius was as a teenager. Or more accurately how neat he was. It seemed like everyone expected Sirius to be the messy one given his personality and public persona, but he was especially persnickety about his belongings. He was the most organized of all of them.

Bellatrix's room was a wreck. It looked like someone had dueled inside it and then left without picking up a single thing. He didn't understand how she could own this amount of trash given that she'd only been out of Azkaban for a few months.

"I think Bellatrix was a raccoon in another life," Remus whispered. Sirius snickered.

They searched through what they could find, but there wasn't so much as a dark object in the room. It looked like it was mostly scraps of other things, loose Galleons, and loads of clothing. Sirius found it peculiar though he wasn't sure why.

"I haven't —" Remus began to say, cutting himself off with a piercing scream. Sirius whipped around to look at him and found Remus writhing in pain. He gasped and made to move toward him when something caught his eye. As if she was bleeding through the wall, Bellatrix came into view.

"What do we have here?" she said in a sing-song voice. "A wolf come to steal from me?"

Sirius pointed his wand at her just as she released Remus from the spell she had him under. He was shivering, but his eyes looked clear as he gazed at the crazed woman.

"Where is my cousin, wolf?" she asked.

She didn't know Sirius was in the room. No doubt because of the invisibility cloak he still had on. Sirius bit his tongue to keep from answering her, from jumping in and drawing her attention away from Remus.

"I came here alone," Remus said through gritted teeth.

Bellatrix laughed joyfully. "You aren't the only ones with a little elf spy," Bellatrix said with a wide grin, her teeth sharp and glinting. "Tell me where he is."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Remus replied, pushing himself up so that he wasn't lying flat on the ground. "Sirius isn't here."

"Don't lie," Bellatrix commanded. She didn't sound angry, she sounded like she was having fun. The sound grated on Sirius's nerves. He wanted to hit her with a spell but he had seen firsthand how fast she was with her wand. He wouldn't put Remus in danger by failing to kill her a second time. "I heard it was his son that I killed," she said. "Surely he's here to put an end to me."

"You don't know anything," Remus said with a small smirk. So Bellatrix didn't know who Reggie really was. That was a surprise.

"For now," she said, lifting her wand again. Sirius expected her to cast Legilimens to get information from Remus, but he should have known that she didn't have the patience. "*Crucio* ." The word was said with a laugh. Remus screamed again, his body bending against the pain.

Sirius barely had time to watch it happen. He didn't even bother to cast a spell, tucking his wand into his sleeve as he jumped forward, transforming in midair. He would like to say that he thought of Regulus, and the way he had fallen into the veil, but Reggie didn't even cross his mind. All he could hear was Remus's pained screams. Remus had more than enough pain for one person. How dare Bellatrix try to add to it.

Padfoot's teeth dug into Bellatrix's side with a sickening squelch. He sunk them in and ripped his head away with a furious shake. Bellatrix didn't scream, she only released a grunt of surprise, well-versed in pain, and turned her wand on him.

"*Avada —*" The second word never made it past her lips as he dropped the blood, skin, and organs from his maw and bit onto her jaw, wrenching it from her face. Her eyes lit with surprise and anger, but never pain, not even in her dying moments.

He pried her throat from her neck as the final gurgling sounds left her body, already going back to hurt her again when he felt a hand at the gruff of his neck. He growled in warning.

"Padfoot, that's enough," Remus said gently. "Kreacher. Take us home."

Sirius didn't even have time to transform back before he was side-alonged back to Grimmauld Place and apparated right into his bedroom. He growled again, this time in frustration and anger, perhaps a bit in something else that he couldn't understand. The hand on his neck began to scratch him lightly, reaching up to pet behind his ears before gliding down his back.

"Transform back, please," Remus said softly, his voice like a seductive purr to Padfoot's ears. Sirius shivered and slid back into his human form, not bothering to stand on two feet. Remus was kneeling next to him, and the moment he was human, Remus's lips were against his. There was still blood on his face and in his mouth, but there was Remus's tongue in the mix, sliding against his.

Sirius groaned into his mouth, lost to the sensation, to the very depravity of it all. He was sure he would lose himself completely, but they were distracted when something appeared in the room right next to them. They pulled away just far enough to see a black flame erupt in the air, a scroll appearing with it and dropping to the floor.

"What —"

"It's like Fawkes, but I've never seen a black flame like that," Remus said curiously. He reached forward to grab the scroll, already pulling away from Sirius who groaned at the loss. His head still felt floaty and detached. Remus's face paled. "I think you need to see this."

Sirius sat up fully and took the scroll from Remus's scarred fingers.

Lord Sirius Orion Black III,

At 6:40 pm this evening, we detained your ward, Harry James Potter , along with two of his accomplices , Ronald Bilius Weasley and Hermione Jean Granger , due to their unauthorized entry into the Department of Mysteries. Your immediate presence is required to handle this issue and the resulting property damage.

Unspeakable Kevalin

"It's Harry," Sirius said, although Remus had already read the letter.

“*Scourgify*,” Remus cast quickly, cleaning the blood from both of their faces, before rushing to the door, no doubt to look for Molly or Arthur.

“Wait,” Sirius whispered.

“Why?” Remus asked though he stopped walking.

“Let’s just go. I don’t want to waste time talking to them.”

Remus looked torn, glancing between Sirius and the door before he finally nodded.

“Let’s go.”

They flooded to the Ministry quickly without alerting anyone in the house. Molly and Arthur might have already received a letter given Ron’s involvement, but if not then they would soon. It had only been half an hour since Ron, Hermione, and Harry had been arrested in the Department of Mysteries, but it felt much later than that. The Ministry atrium was abandoned so they rushed to the lifts.

Sirius had never met an Unspeakable, though he’d heard loads of rumors about them. They were very secretive, that much he knew, but he didn’t expect them to be so secretive that they would wear full-body disguises. One Unspeakable was waiting for them at the door to the Department of Mysteries, wearing a full body robe that seemed to swallow color; their face was undetectable under their hood. The very fabric almost hurt Sirius’s eyes.

“Follow me,” the Unspeakable said.

“Are you Unspeakable Kevalin?” Sirius asked, following them through the door, into the round room, and through to a line of offices.

“No, Lord Black,” the Unspeakable replied. They did not speak again before opening the door to a tiny office. It was so skinny that the desk took up most of the room. There was a tiny chair behind it and an even smaller one in front of it. In one of the chairs, sat Hermione, Ron kneeling in front of her and whispering quietly. She was rubbing the back of her head, her eyes squinted painfully.

Harry was sitting on the desk staring miserably at his feet when they walked in, but he jumped to his feet when he noticed them.

“Sirius —”

“Harry, what were you thinking?” Sirius said. His voice was harsher than he intended, the worry he’d felt finally bubbling to the surface. Harry flinched before a guilty expression crossed his face.

“It wasn’t his idea,” Ron said suddenly, standing up and walking around the desk. “It was my idea, Harry tried to stop me.”

“Why?” Remus asked. The Unspeakable closed the door behind them as he finally entered the room, and Sirius heard the lock click into place.

“That can’t be good,” Sirius mumbled. “Are you all okay?”

Remus was apparently still waiting for an answer on why they were here in the first place, but Sirius felt like his question was a bit more pressing.

“We’re fine,” Harry mumbled. “Hermione was hurt by a piece of falling stone, but other than that, we’re okay.”

“Mind if I have a look?” Remus asked Hermione, who nodded once, her shoulders tensing when the movement caused her pain.

“Why are you here?” Sirius asked, reaching unconsciously for Harry who walked into the circle of his arms and let himself be hugged.

Ron looked away, staring down at his feet.

“Well?” Sirius prompted when he didn’t respond.

“We —” Ron began to say but was interrupted by the door opening. It was a different Unspeakable. Sirius could only tell because of their height, they looked much taller than the other one, though it was still hard to look at them for too long.

“Unspeakable Kevalin?” Sirius asked.

“I am,” the Unspeakable responded. Their voice was unfathomable, impossible to tell the pitch or tone.

“What is going on?” Remus asked, tucking his wand away after casting a healing spell on Hermione. She looked much better, color already returning to her face.

Unspeakable Kevalin was quiet for a long moment. Sirius thought they might be looking around the room at each of them but it was impossible to tell.

“What were you trying to do in the Death Chamber?” Unspeakable Kevalin said.

Ron cleared his throat slightly. “We were trying to pull someone out of the veil.”

Sirius huffed. Why would they do something so stupid? The veil was a death trap, there was no way to save anyone from it.

“Who were you attempting to pull from the veil?” Unspeakable Kevalin asked.

Sirius rolled his eyes. Surely Unspeakable Kevalin knew the answer to that. Who else other than the boy they all knew who had recently died in the Death Chamber?

“Regulus Black,” Hermione said quietly, mournfully.

“Why are they still being held?” Sirius interjected. “When can we leave?”

“The room has been demolished, the veil destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” Remus asked, gaping at the Unspeakable.

“Merlin,” Sirius said, rubbing his face. “What did you do to it exactly?” He turned to look at Harry when he asked it. Harry was still standing under Sirius’s arm that was stretched across his shoulders.

“Erm...” Harry said uncertainly.

“So that’s what you meant by property damage,” Sirius muttered. “Are you expecting me to pay for it?” He doubted that there was a numerical value that could be placed on the veil, but perhaps the Unspeakables were going to try, especially given that the Black family was indirectly responsible.

Unspeakable Kevalin did not respond for a long few seconds before turning and leaving the room, the door audibly locking behind them once again.

“Surely they can’t just keep us here,” Hermione said nervously.

“The Unspeakables don’t answer to anyone,” Sirius said. “The fact that they called me at all is a shock. They could probably keep us here indefinitely.

“But someone would come looking for us, wouldn’t they?” Hermione asked.

“I cannot believe you three came here,” Sirius responded. “Truly, this was one of the dumbest things you could have possibly done.”

“Sirius,” Remus said gently. Sirius turned to glare at him but ultimately relented. He was just as worried as Hermione sounded, and though he was mad at them, it probably wasn’t helpful to prattle on about it now.

They didn’t have to wait long as only a few minutes later, the door was unlocked once again. Two Unspeakables came into the room and due to their bizarre cloaks, Sirius nearly missed the person stumbling between them. His hands were tied together behind his back and there was a thick, black blindfold over his eyes.

“Regulus,” Harry breathed.

“You’re free to go,” one of the Unspeakables said, then without lifting a wand, the ties on his hands and blindfold were both removed. Regulus blinked blearily at them, having only a second to get his bearings before Harry rushed forward and hugged him fiercely.

Regulus’s arms came up automatically, his face hidden by Harry’s unruly hair. He mumbled something that Sirius couldn’t hear, still frozen a few feet away, to which Harry responded, “It’s Harry.”

“Harry?” Regulus said, pushing Harry back just enough to look at his face.

“I’m so sorry,” Harry said instantly.

“Oh, Harry, it’s okay,” Regulus said, pulling Harry back in. He still looked a little dazed, but his eyes met Sirius’s over Harry’s shoulder, and they seemed to clear slightly.

“Regulus,” Sirius said, his body finally shaking free. He stumbled forward and hugged them both, breathing in the smell of his younger brother. Alive. He was alive.

Chapter End Notes

sirius and regulus 🐾 mauling people to death

welcome back, my love. you know i couldn't end the year without him.

the patronus part II.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Regulus didn't remember dying the first time around. He remembered the *inferi* and their clawing hands, sure, but the actual act of dying, of being dead, he had no memory of that. It was simply darkness until he returned, choking on water and dragging his body up onto the rocks of the cave.

He remembered dying the second time. He remembered being dead. He fell through the veil, watching Harry's face twist in horror — a truly terrible thing to witness — and then he was nothing. He simply no longer existed. In the silence that was beyond the veil, he thought about what it might be like to die a normal way. No emotion was tied to it, only disconnected thoughts as if he were a muggle scientist researching the effect a potion might have on an inanimate object. Did muggle scientists use potions? He couldn't remember.

He wondered if real death was like this, normal death so to speak. Would he still be floating away in nothingness? Or would he move beyond? He thought distantly that he should be concerned about his lack of onward movement, but there was no panic, no desire to move or escape. He simply was.

Time ceased to exist beyond the veil, just like light and emotion. He would never be able to explain how he felt existing in limbo, waiting and waiting and waiting.

At one point, he realized he wasn't alone. Or not completely. It wasn't so much that he could hear them or see them, but he thought he could feel them. It was as if they were reaching through a heavily filled wardrobe, pressing up against him through the layers and layers of clothing. He could feel their panic where his own was missing. They didn't like where he was trapped, their desperation to pull him through was overwhelming, but they could do nothing. Both of them were helpless.

Eventually, he felt the person touch him as if to grab his hand through the veil. It seemed they had given up trying to get to him, knowing that he was beyond their help, just as they were beyond his reach. He was sure they were holding hands, although he couldn't feel it. He wondered if they could feel it; if his body felt like anything beyond empty, dead space. They seemed content to do it either way.

Time passed, or it didn't, regardless, one moment there was nothing, and the next there was a drifting scent of evergreen trees and cinnamon bread baking in the oven. He'd smelled it before, but he couldn't place the memory. He was a bit preoccupied with the fact that he could smell anything at all. He wasn't breathing, he had nothing to breathe with, yet he could smell.

He was ripped from nothing into existence like being shoved through a window, glass digging into his skin as he plunged into the darkness beneath him. He hit the floor with a loud grunt, barely getting his bearings before he heard a small *oof* next to him. He tried to speak,

to ask what was going on, but his throat was dry and all that released was an unpleasant croaking sound.

Before he could open his eyes, a blindfold magically wrapped around his head. He hadn't heard someone cast a spell, they must have done it wordlessly. He tried to speak again, but his voice was just as damaged. He coughed twice, the feeling tearing up his throat. He could hear people speaking now, whispering to each other. Another spell was cast on him, the magic brushing against his skin like the edge of a knife, and his arms were wrenched behind his back and tied together.

Hands grabbed him under his arms and pulled him to his feet. He could feel now that there was a layer of clothing between his skin and the arms holding him which he was thankful for. He was disoriented but aware enough to hope to hold onto some of his dignity. He felt his body be dragged up some stairs and across the floor. He heard the sound of a door opening in front of him and then closing behind him.

He was shoved into a chair, colliding against it with the back of his knees, and with a quick spell, he was immobilized. He couldn't even move his mouth to ask what was going on or what was happening to him. All he could do was breathe in through his nose steadily in hopes of calming himself down as alarm began to overtake him.

It was the breathing that really made it click for him. *He was breathing!* How was he alive? He didn't realize that it was possible for someone to come back through the veil, but then again, he should have stayed dead at the bottom of the cave over a decade prior, and he somehow came back from that too.

It was all so unexplainable, so incomprehensible, and now he was frozen to a chair, blinded and bound by someone. Was he in danger? Did they plan to kill him again? He had no way of knowing. All he could do was focus on his breathing, sucking in air through his nose like it was the only thing that could save him.

He tried not to let his mind wander too much, tried not to think about the body that had just been jerked back into the world of the living, but he couldn't escape the small twinges of pain forever, they were slowly coming through, forcing their way to the forefront of his mind.

He wasn't sure how much time passed like that, but when he felt like he was right on the brink of another silent panic attack, the body-bind holding him was removed. He gasped for air, panting in distress, and was pulled once again to his feet. He was pretty sure that they were just dragging him last time, but now he could feel his feet beneath him and tried to walk in the direction they pulled him.

His arms were beginning to hurt, the rope around his wrists digging uncomfortably into his skin. He wondered if it was Death Eaters. If that's why they'd incapacitated him the moment he was awake. Were they taking him to the Dark Lord? He heard a door open and a second later the blindfold and rope around his wrist were removed. He could hear someone speaking, but it was as if they were trying to speak underwater, the words muffled and unintelligible.

He blinked harshly, the bright light in the room blinding him slightly as his eyes fought to adjust. He didn't have time to run, fight, or even think before a body slammed into his, arms

tucking around him and holding him so tightly that it hurt. His arms came up automatically, wrapping around the person without instruction.

They felt warm against him and all he could think about was the bundle of curly hair that his face was currently buried in.

“James,” he said without thinking, although before the person responded he knew he was wrong. For one, James had never been shorter than him.

“It’s Harry,” Harry responded. *Of course*, Regulus thought.

He pushed him back so that he could get a good look at him. The last time he’d seen his face, Harry looked horrified and distressed. He didn’t look much better now, tears streaming down his cheeks, his eyes anguished.

“I’m so sorry,” Harry sobbed. Regulus didn’t know how long he’d been gone, but it must have been some time because he could see the changes in Harry, the way his eyes were sunken into his face and his cheeks were a tad too hollow. He felt like he could see every terrible sleepless night and every skipped meal just from one glance.

“Oh, Harry, it’s okay,” Regulus said, dangerously close to crying himself. He’d never been a sympathetic crier, except perhaps when he was a child and hadn’t learned how to bury his emotions like a proper member of the Black family, but seeing Harry cry like this was awful. He pulled him back in, feeling Harry’s chest shake with sobs.

He looked up over his shoulder, just now realizing that they weren’t alone in the room, and made eye contact with his brother. Sirius looked bewildered, his hair wild and knotted like he hadn’t been taking care of it. His face was clean but there was a splatter of blood on the edge of his shirt and a few drops down the center like he’d been feasting on a bloody steak.

“Regulus,” Sirius said, speaking the word like it was salvation. He took a large step forward and threw his arms around both Regulus and Harry.

It wasn’t long before they left what Regulus quickly realized was still the Department of Mysteries. He hugged Ron and Hermione as well, both of them weepy and relieved to see him. He even hugged Remus which was awkward and not something he aimed to repeat even if he died and was revived a third time.

They arrived at Grimmauld Place without speaking much. Regulus wondered how long he’d been gone, but before he could ask he got his answer when he walked into the kitchen and discovered the birthday party for Harry that they’d apparently abandoned.

Molly and Arthur were there, running around in a tizzy. Molly didn’t even take a breath before she began screaming at Ron. Neither she nor Arthur seemed to notice that Regulus was in the room with them. Or anyone else for that matter. Ron for his part just looked seriously back at her as if he’d expected the screaming and would make the decision to incur her wrath all over again if given the opportunity.

“What were you thinking?” Arthur asked sternly.

“He was trying to bring Regulus back,” Harry interjected.

“What?” Molly asked. They both finally seemed to snap out of whatever spell made them angry with Ron when they noticed who was standing just a few paces away.

After that, it was more hugging, all of which Regulus endured without complaint. Luna, Ginny, and the twins had apparently been at the party as well but had been sent home when Molly and Arthur realized Ron, Hermione, and Harry were all missing.

“How did you bring Regulus back?” Remus asked quietly once things settled down a bit. Ron looked a bit embarrassed when everyone in the room turned to him. Regulus was interested in that himself.

“Well, I found a book that talked about the veil and that led me to a runic spell that Hermione helped me use,” Ron said awkwardly.

“What kind of runic spell?” Sirius asked.

Ron shrugged uncomfortably. “I don’t know, I found it in your library here.”

“Ron,” Hermione whispered. He gave her a questioning look, and she raised her eyebrows pointedly. He shook his head confusedly and she darted her eyes away from him toward Sirius then back again. Ron shook his head intently this time, but Hermione just gave him another look that Regulus didn’t understand. Ron sighed in defeat.

“And I used a stone that I stole from your bedroom,” he mumbled quickly, glancing at Sirius once before looking down at his feet in shame.

“My bedroom?” Sirius asked incredulously.

“Wait, what stone?” Remus asked.

“It was in a box with a destroyed ring,” Ron said, his voice so quiet that Regulus had to strain himself just to hear him.

Sirius’s mouth dropped open. “You used a Hor—”

“Sirius,” Remus hissed. Sirius snapped his mouth shut. Regulus looked between them in confusion before the word finally made sense. Horcrux. Ron must have found the Horcrux that Dumbledore gave to Sirius and used it to bring Regulus back to life. Oh Merlin, that couldn’t be good. He didn’t think the Dark Lord’s soul would be a good contender for necromancy.

“Was it valuable?” Molly asked worriedly. “Ronald, I cannot believe you stole from Sirius —”

“Not more valuable than my brother is to me,” Sirius said quickly. “Really, Molly, it’s okay. Ron, don’t worry, though next time please just tell me rather than scaring us all like that.”

"I wasn't sure that it would work," Ron said, his cheeks growing red. "I didn't want to tell anyone in case I was wrong."

Harry gave Ron a soft smile and patted him on the back. Even Molly seemed mulled by that explanation. They didn't stay long after that. Regulus was dead on his feet, and it was clear that everyone else wasn't doing much better.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Harry assured Ron as he followed his parents through the floo. Hermione, Regulus discovered, had been living at Grimmauld for a few weeks now, but she retired to bed almost immediately after the Weasleys left.

"I'm so happy you're back, Regulus," she said softly as she hugged him one last time before bed. She looked like she might start crying, but quickly turned away from Regulus before he could comfort her and ran up the stairs.

"Are you hungry? Thirsty?" Sirius asked once it was just the four of them.

"No, I'm fine," Regulus said, shaking his head slightly. "Why do you have blood on your shirt?"

"What?" Harry asked sharply while Sirius looked down at himself in surprise.

"Oh, I thought I cleaned off all of that," Remus said, frowning. Sirius looked up, a flash of guilt and something dangerously close to madness crossing over his eyes.

"Is it yours?" Regulus asked.

Sirius shook his head. "It's..." He looked up at Remus uncertainly. Remus bit his lip thoughtfully.

"Well?" Harry asked. He looked worried, stress lines obvious on his young face, his eyes darting between them.

"It's Bellatrix's blood," Remus said finally. Sirius looked like he was seconds away from throwing his hands over Remus's mouth to stop him from speaking, but it was too late and the words were out.

"Bellatrix?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Is she dead?" Regulus asked grimly. Harry probably shouldn't have been here for this conversation, but there wasn't anything he could do about that now.

Sirius looked bizarrely embarrassed for a second before nodding. "Yes, she's dead," he said.

"That's what you left to do?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Sirius answered, looking so deeply uncomfortable like he wanted to melt into the ground.

Regulus closed his eyes. They were still standing in the living room near the floo, and though his body still felt oddly disconnected from his mind, he was beginning to feel the light trickle of exhaustion through his bones.

“You left Harry’s birthday party so you could kill our cousin?” Regulus asked tiredly.

“Erm, yes,” Sirius responded.

“I’m not mad,” Harry said, though he was still frowning. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We didn’t know if we would find her,” Remus responded. “Kreacher told us she was alone, but there was no way to be sure. We didn’t want to worry you.”

Regulus’s eyes snapped open. “Kreacher told you?” he asked. All three of them look at him in confusion.

“Yes, why?” Sirius said. Regulus gritted his teeth together but shook his head.

“I think I need to lie down,” Regulus said. “Can we finish this conversation tomorrow?”

“Oh, right, of course,” Sirius said. “Are you sure you’re not hungry? I mean, it’s been a while since you ate so if you want —”

“No, it’s fine really. I’m just very, very tired,” Regulus said, punctuating his sentence with a yawn he didn’t have to fake.

He could tell that they wanted to follow him, and he didn’t blame them, but he just needed a moment to himself. And sleep. He really needed to sleep. He found his bedroom was exactly how he left it except for the bed, the pillows were slightly askew and the blankets were rumpled like someone had been sleeping in his bed. He decided not to question it, he was pretty sure that if Harry or Sirius died he might do the same thing.

He closed the door tightly behind him and went to grab his wand before remembering he didn’t have it. Where was it when he died? He tried to remember. He didn’t think he had it when he went through the veil. Hopefully, there was still someone who could get it for him.

“Kreacher,” he called. Kreacher arrived with a pop.

“Master Regulus,” Kreacher cried in awe and shock.

“Stop.” Regulus held up his hand, already seeing tears form in Kreacher’s. “Where is my wand?” Kreacher opened his mouth to respond, but Regulus interrupted. “Bring it to me,” he commanded. He hated to make Kreacher do things, but he was too angry to wait, too hateful.

Kreacher disappeared and reappeared a moment later, Regulus’s wand in his hands. “Master Regulus’s wand,” he croaked. Regulus took it and watched as Kreacher flinched away. He stared down at the wand, enjoying the feeling of magic as it reacquainted itself with his fingers.

“Kreacher... Why did you do it?” he asked quietly.

Kreacher immediately started crying, blubbering loudly.

“Kreacher, stop,” Regulus commanded. Kreacher stopped making noise instantly.

“Kreacher is sorry, Master Regulus,” he said after a moment. “Kreacher did not expect for Regulus to die.”

Regulus clenched his teeth together again, closing his eyes against the rage that rushed through him. “So you thought only Sirius would die. Or Harry,” he growled.

“No, Master Regulus,” Kreacher said, sounding horrified.

“Enough,” Regulus said sharply before Kreacher could continue. “I can't even bear to look at you.” He turned his back on the elf, his oldest friend. Kreacher was loyal to him when no one else was and now... What had become of them?

He heard Kreacher hiccup as he held back tears.

“I need you to tell me what you want. Do you want to be freed? Because I will free you, no questions asked,” Regulus said.

“No, Master Regulus,” Kreacher gasped in horror. Regulus couldn't help but think about everything Hermione had taught him, about the way elves had been forced into these positions, forced to tie themselves to wizards. He was a part of that, whether he wanted to admit it or not. Kreacher didn't want to be freed because of the shame it would bring him, but that didn't make it right.

Regulus sighed. “Kreacher, I need you to leave.”

“No, Master Regulus!”

“I cannot decide this tonight, but I don't want to see you. Do you understand? You're not to come back unless I call you,” Regulus said, still not turning around. Kreacher was silent for a long moment before responding.

“Yes, Master Regulus,” he said dejectedly, then he was gone. Regulus breathed out, his chest tight with the memories of his death and the moments that had led up to it.

He was finally alone though after so much excitement and the first thing he realized was that his body hurt. It was the same pain as before. He'd died and came back, his body changing completely as it traveled into and out of the veil, yet the nerve damage was still there. He tried and failed not to feel frustrated by that fact. He walked into the bathroom and looked in the mirror.

It was his first time seeing himself, and he was shocked by what he found. He was surprised that no one else had mentioned it, but he was older. Not by much, but definitely a few years. He must have been the age he was when he died the first time. Eighteen rather than fifteen as he was when he died the second time.

He rubbed his face tiredly and slowly began to pull off the clothes he'd died in. He was anxious to shower and change so that he could sleep. He didn't want to be awake any longer, but he could already feel the dread of what he would find under his shirt. It was like he knew before he could even see it. He vaguely hoped that the nerve pain was an indicator of what he didn't come back with, but his physical age didn't bode well.

He avoided looking at his left arm at first, focusing instead on the wounds that now littered his chest. He was lucky there weren't any on his face or neck, but not lucky enough not to have them. He supposed he was glad that they weren't open and bleeding, but it was still disappointing. Where his skin was once unblemished, there were several long clawing scars across his chest from where the *inferi* had dragged him to his death. He touched one lightly, but there was no pain. He squeezed his eyes shut. It was just a bit of vanity, he thought to himself. It could be worse.

He took a deep breath and finally looked where he knew he would find another mark. His left arm which had been unmarked in his second life now bore the brand that had ruined his life the first time. He decidedly did not cry upon seeing it, but it was a close thing. He'd had a chance without it and ruined it.

What else had he lost during his second death? His breaths were coming dangerously fast now and the pain in his back and legs was growing worse. He closed his eyes again and focused on the magic he had used to alter his body, hoping that he hadn't lost it all.

A moment later, he was no longer himself, but a bear. Immediately his mind calmed, simplified by the animal's emotions and thoughts. His pain was gone, as it always was when he was in his animagus form. He shook his head around, pleased by the change, and for a moment considered sleeping as a bear rather than a person.

Ultimately the desire to shower won out, and he changed back, carefully avoiding looking at his left arm, shame trickling in his stomach. He was in the shower for a long time, letting the water wash away any thoughts or worries that might plague him, and when he climbed out, he worked to direct his thoughts to more pleasant things.

So the Dark Mark had returned, but he still had Sirius and Harry. As long as they didn't see it, he wouldn't lose them like he lost James. He thought about Harry's sobbed apology, remembering the pained look on his face even as relief took over. He thought about Ron who had found some hidden knowledge about the veil that no one had been able to discover in hundreds of years. He thought about Hermione and the small smile she wore when Ron explained what he'd done. He'd missed more than just a few months obviously.

He was about to climb into bed when he picked up his wand, thinking about the bear that he still had access to. He couldn't help but think about the rest of his magic, would it be inaccessible or affected by his second death?

He wasn't sure why he chose that spell, perhaps it was just the fact that Harry, Ron, and Hermione were in his thoughts that he wanted to try. "*Expecto Patronum*," he cast. Immediately, the warmth spread from his chest and through his fingertips. The Dark Mark hadn't stolen this from him, he thought with relief. He went to brush the patronus away, not

keen on seeing James's stag galloping around, but the movement caught his eye before he could send it away.

It wasn't a stag at all, he realized. No, the stag was gone. It was a bear.

Chapter End Notes

my personal headcanon is that sirius was trapped in the veil when he died in canon, but once harry used the stone to see him right before he was killed by voldemort, sirius was freed and able to move on.

the mark.

Regulus wasn't sure what he expected his first full day back to life would be like, but he hadn't expected the icy silence that he received from Harry. He slept hard, unmoving, and without dreams, and woke in the late morning to find Sirius in his animagus form curled up at the foot of his bed.

"What if I'd been sleeping naked?" Regulus mumbled, grateful that he'd decided to sleep in a long-sleeved shirt. He would have to grow accustomed to doing that now that the Mark was back.

Padfoot gave him a withering look and gagged loudly.

"Eugh," Regulus said in disgust. "If you're going to make that sound, do it elsewhere please?"

Sirius left him to get dressed and ready for the day but met him at the breakfast table, a full plate of food already set out. The moment the smell hit his nose, Regulus was ravenous with hunger, digging into the food with vigor. He only looked up after shoveling several large bites into his mouth.

"What?" he said after swallowing. Sirius was openly staring at him, unblinking.

Sirius coughed and blinked hard. "Sorry," he muttered. "I just can't believe that you're here."

Regulus flushed with discomfort, though he wasn't totally sure why. "Tell me what I missed." He still felt unsteady, not totally real or alive, and he wasn't ready to look at his thoughts critically. He needed to do something, some forward motion to work toward, and the only way to do that was to get caught up.

"Right," Sirius said with a nod, finally starting on his own food. It took him nearly an hour to tell Regulus everything, mostly because Sirius kept getting distracted and staring off into the distance, that disturbing haunted look in his eyes.

"I can't believe you were actually arrested, and they let you go," Regulus said, his eyebrows halfway up his forehead.

"I know," Sirius agreed. "I thought I was done for, what with all the other Death Eaters arrested at the same time, but I guess with Fudge stepping down, Dumbledore was able to pull a few strings."

"You think Dumbledore was responsible for getting you out?" Regulus asked.

"At least partially."

Regulus hummed quietly.

“What?” Sirius asked.

“Well... it just makes me wonder,” Regulus said slowly, “why didn’t he try to free you last time? I mean, if he had the power to get you out now, why not before?”

Sirius’s eyebrows furrowed. “I suppose Crouch Senior didn’t help,” Sirius replied after a beat. “Around that time, he was throwing everyone in Azkaban with barely any trial, including his son.”

Regulus carefully didn’t flinch, but it was a close thing.

“Plus, I guess Remus wanted to take Harry home with him, but they wouldn’t let him without me since I’m his godfather.”

“Remus was working with Dumbledore to get you free?” Regulus asked, pleasantly surprised.

Sirius nodded.

“And he wasn’t last time?”

Regulus hadn’t thought about it before, but surely there was someone who believed Sirius was innocent when he was sentenced without a trial. Though he personally didn’t believe it when he came back, Sirius had been in prison for years at that point, more than a decade, he supposed there wasn’t much of a reason for him to question it at the time. He wasn’t even sure that he felt bad about it now. What else was he supposed to believe? It wasn’t like Sirius’s guilt was that far off from the truth. James really was betrayed by one of his closest friends.

He wondered why Remus never questioned it though. Weren’t they living together at the time? He wracked his brain but couldn’t remember if James had told him that or not. Sirius’s face darkened menacingly, the lines in his skin seeming to grow deeper as if they were carved into him with a knife.

“Let’s talk about something else,” he grumbled.

“Sure,” Regulus said quickly, if only to erase that look of madness.

Sirius told him about the Dursleys and the locked door that Harry was kept behind. The details made rage nearly swallow him, but there was something in Sirius’s eyes that kept his feet firmly on the ground. It was a sort of avoidance, a look he’d seen often in their childhood when Sirius would do something against the rules and try to lie to get out of it. He was never a very good liar as a kid, at least not when something was his fault.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Regulus asked firmly.

Sirius pursed his lips slightly, looking away.

“Sirius.”

“Listen,” Sirius said, “don’t be too hard on Harry, okay? Once I tell you I mean.”

Regulus gave him a quizzical look. “Why would I be hard on Harry?”

Sirius sighed and told him about all the food he found rotting in Harry’s bedroom at the Dursleys’ house, about the way he seemed to avoid every meal once they finally got him home, and finally, how it took a few days for Sirius and Remus to properly notice.

“Sirius,” he said disappointingly.

“That’s not all,” Sirius said like a confession. He told him about the episode Harry had right after Regulus’s funeral, while Sirius and Remus were out playing vigilante. It wasn’t easy to hear about, Regulus grinding his teeth together to keep from snapping, but he held in the emotions. Things weren’t perfect with him gone, but clearly they’d figured things out since then, and there was no use punishing his brother for things he couldn’t help.

“Why did you say I shouldn’t be too hard on Harry?” Regulus asked once he got his emotions back under control.

“I’ve got him eating again. I just didn’t want you to pile on, or maybe even mention it at all. I think it would set him back if you brought it up.”

Regulus sighed, but ultimately agreed not to talk about it directly, at least for the time being. If he noticed it getting worse then he wouldn’t hold back. He was impressed that his brother seemed so aware of Harry’s eating habits and the way they intertwined with his mental state. He wondered if he understood because of his own problems with food since escaping Azkaban.

He let Sirius divert the conversation then, back to Regulus’s bizarre funeral where Andromeda, their disowned cousin, showed up.

“How did she even know about it?”

“Tonks,” Sirius said, the expression on his face going a bit tight as he said her name. Regulus nodded for him to go on. It sounded like they had a proper wizarding funeral. Regulus was surprised that Sirius had bothered. “I figured it would have been important to you,” Sirius said, rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably. “I don’t give a shit about all that muck, but...”

“Thank you,” Regulus said seriously. “I appreciate it. Though I suppose we should probably remove my name from the grave. Just in case, I mean.”

“I’m not sure how to,” Sirius replied. “But we can try.” He explained who else was in attendance, it wasn’t many people. Dumbledore was worried that the funeral might attract Death Eaters if it was made public. He was probably right, Regulus realized. Most of the people on the list made sense to him, even Fleur. He doubted she was there because of him though, but he remembered the look she’d given Bill during the Triwizard Tournament. Only one name stood out to him among the list.

“Why was Cedric Diggory at my funeral?” Regulus asked stiffly.

“Dunno,” Sirius said lazily, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. “When Harry ran off, Cedric was the one to go and get him.”

“Harry ran off?”

“He was pretty upset,” Sirius conceded. “I could have found him with magic — I mean I knew he was still in the cemetery — but Cedric said he wanted to talk to him so we let him go.”

Regulus felt a prickling at the back of his neck. “Cedric wanted to talk to Harry? Alone? And you let him?”

Sirius gave him a weird look. “Yes? Should I not have?”

“No,” Regulus said quickly, glaring down at the half-empty plate in front of him. “No, it’s fine.”

Sirius stared at him for a long moment, waiting for Regulus to explain.

“It’s nothing,” he said when Sirius didn’t move on. “How long were they gone?” he couldn’t help asking.

Sirius looked incredulous. “I don’t know, a few minutes maybe. What are you getting at?”

“I’m not getting at anything,” Regulus said, practically snapping.

Sirius looked even more incredulous. “Excuse me?”

“It’s nothing,” he repeated.

“What? Do you think he was over there sneaking him cigarettes or something?” Sirius said sarcastically.

“He’s much older than Harry,” Regulus responded, urging Sirius to understand.

“He’s only a few years older,” Sirius said, though now he sounded confused.

“That’s still too old, Sirius.”

Sirius stared at him dubiously, before understanding seemed to dawn on him. His face twisted into some horrible amalgamation of disgust and humor. “You think they were shagging?” he joked.

Regulus recoiled like Sirius had spit in his face. “If Cedric and Harry were shagging at *my* funeral when you were supposed to be watching him, then I am going to cut off all your fingers,” Regulus said in a low voice.

Sirius guffawed loudly. “They weren’t actually shagging! Get a grip on yourself. What do you have against Cedric anyway? Harry seems to like him.”

“Sirius, I swear to —”

“Relax,” Sirius said, still laughing. “You have serious issues, did you know that?”

Regulus glared at him darkly, but it just made Sirius’s grin widen. It took a bit to get their conversation back on track after that, with Sirius finally out from under his dark cloud, and Regulus suffering under the knowledge that he couldn’t even die for two months without Cedric moving in on Harry.

Eventually, Sirius managed to calm down and continued telling him about the summer. They talked about Regulus’s recent birthday.

“How old do you suppose you are now?” Sirius asked.

Regulus shrugged. “I don’t know,” Regulus said. “Twenty-something.”

Sirius looked like he was trying to mentally do the math, but appeared to give up before he arrived at an answer and moved on.

Sirius told him about Hermione and how she had started living at Grimmauld a few weeks prior. Sirius thought she was good for Harry, that much was obvious, and Regulus couldn’t help the warmth he felt knowing that Harry hadn’t been alone, that he’d had his friends beside him.

“Oh, we got your O.W.L. results back as well,” Sirius said, standing up to go searching for them. Regulus waved him off.

“I don’t care about that,” Regulus said.

“Not at all?” Sirius asked, slowly sitting back down.

“I think it’s irrelevant now. I mean, it’s not like I can go back to Hogwarts.”

Sirius paused. “Why not?”

“Well, I’m assuming most of them think I’m dead.”

“That’s an easy fix,” Sirius mumbled. Regulus rolled his eyes.

“Look at me,” Regulus said, gesturing to himself. Sirius looked at him quizzically, quirking up an eyebrow. “I’m too old to be a student. I’m not fifteen anymore. Or sixteen. Whatever I’m supposed to be.”

“Oh,” Sirius said quietly, and finally seemed to take him in. He looked Regulus up and down, his face growing wearier by the moment. “I hadn’t — I didn’t notice, but you’re right. You’re older. Why are you older?”

Regulus sighed. "I don't know," he said quietly. "But I don't think I'll be able to pretend to be sixteen again."

"There are ways," Sirius replied, still looking distracted, that distant look back in his eyes, "glamours and other things."

Regulus and Sirius sat together in the dense silence for a long while before Regulus remembered that they were talking about something.

"Was there anything else that you needed to update me on?" he asked.

Sirius looked like he'd just woken up, his eyes jumping around like he couldn't remember where he was for a moment. "Oh, right... I'm going to adopt Harry. Officially, I mean."

Regulus was overwhelmed with emotions so intensely that he couldn't tell one from the other, he was incapable of reacting so he just stared blankly at Sirius like an idiot.

"If you think it's a good idea," Sirius said quickly, then seemed to think better of it. "I mean, I'm going to do it either way. I think it's a good idea, and I already told Harry. Remus seemed to think —" He cut himself off, a dozen different emotions crowding in on the limited real estate of his face. Regulus wanted to ask what he meant to say, but he wasn't sure that bringing up Remus was a good idea. They seemed to be on good terms the night before, but there was no telling with those two how things would shake out day-to-day.

"Then you killed Bellatrix?" Regulus prompted.

Sirius looked relieved for the change of subject and immediately dove into explaining his intricate plan — his words, not Regulus's. He didn't describe how she died, only that she was dead and that he didn't use magic, which Regulus found worrying. What did he do to her exactly? He knew better than to ask.

He didn't know how to feel about Bellatrix dying. He was always afraid of her when he was a child, she was much older than him and always seemed intimidating, so larger than life even before the cruelty set in. He agreed that she needed to die, there was no other option after she tried to kill Sirius, but it felt strange to discuss it so remorselessly.

"Do you think we could get into her vault now that she's gone?" Regulus asked, waiting for the guilt or perhaps sadness to set in, but it never came.

"I hadn't thought about it, but I doubt it. I think her vault will just go to her husband. If he died too, and his brother, then I might be able to lay claim to it. I'd have to check with the goblins though."

Regulus slumped in his chair. Rodolphus, like many other Death Eaters that had been at the Department of Mysteries, was currently locked up in Azkaban.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that it's going to be exceptionally difficult to kill Rodolphus and Rabastan given their current home," Regulus said unhappily.

Sirius's eyes widened slightly, but he was quick to hide his surprise. "What's made you so keen on murder?" Sirius asked, obviously only half joking.

Regulus froze. He hadn't yet thought about the murder he committed before dying. He didn't regret it, that he knew without having to evaluate it, but he hadn't thought about it in detail. He wasn't sure that he wanted to. The knowledge of what he was capable of, to kill without contrition, and in such a brutal way. He didn't think he would ever share what he had done with another person. He didn't want anyone to know, not about the murder, nor the feelings of hunger he'd experienced in the split moment afterward.

"Tell me again about the conversation you heard between Lucius and Narcissa," Regulus asked.

Sirius shook his head slightly but did tell him, recounting the conversation quickly. "What do you think it means?"

Regulus couldn't respond right away, running over the conversation in his head until it was like a dull buzzing in the back of his mind.

"Regulus," Sirius said, waving his hand in front of Regulus's eyes. "What is it?"

"I need to talk to Dumbledore," he said quietly.

"About Draco?" Sirius asked. Regulus nodded. "Okay, we'll contact him."

"I am not surprised often, in my old age, but I have to admit, I was not expecting to see you again," Dumbledore said when he arrived at Grimmauld an hour later.

Harry still hadn't made an appearance though it was late afternoon. Hermione was in the library reading, and though she made sure to greet Regulus, she seemed to understand that he needed time to deal with things. Remus, however, was nowhere to be found. Regulus wondered if Sirius had gone to speak with him. He asked to talk to Dumbledore alone, which Sirius unwillingly agreed to.

"Yes," Regulus agreed, though Dumbledore hadn't exactly asked a question. "Now, what I called you here about." Dumbledore's lips twitched just slightly, his eyes sparkling. "What do you know about the Malfoys?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I know that Lucius has returned to Voldemort's side. Harry and the others said they encountered him at the Department of Mysteries, though he was gone before the Aurors arrived."

"Yes, Draco left with him," Regulus said. "He came with me to help Harry."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Draco was there to assist Harry?"

"I know it sounds strange, given everything, but he's not a bad kid. He's just..."

“I understand,” Dumbledore said solemnly. “He is not the first to be pulled in by his family, and I doubt he will be the last.”

“The Dark Lord plans to Mark him if he hasn’t already.”

“How do you know this?”

“That’s irrelevant,” Regulus said. “I just know and we need to help him.”

“I see. How do you suggest we do that?” Dumbledore asked in a measured voice.

“I don’t know!” Regulus snapped, urgency making him anxious. “We need to pull him out, bring him here or something. We can protect him.” He wondered if he should have just asked Kreacher to do it. However, the thought of speaking to the elf made him feel mildly ill.

“You believe you could convince him to stay?” Dumbledore asked carefully.

Regulus thought about the way Draco’s eyes seemed to linger on Harry, the way he put himself in danger just to make sure he was safe. He could be an awful little brat, but he genuinely cared about Harry. That much was clear. “Yes, I could convince him to stay.”

“Even without his parents. They will be punished if he leaves and abandons the Death Eaters.”

That gave Regulus pause, not just because it was true — Narcissa and Lucius may very well be killed if Draco escaped — but because the way Dumbledore phrased it made it seem like he’d already gone over this as if he was reenacting a conversation he’d already had.

“You already know all of this, don’t you?” Regulus asked, shooting Dumbledore a suspicious glare.

“You are not the only one with sources within the Death Eaters,” Dumbledore replied evasively.

“Snape,” Regulus realized. Dumbledore didn’t nod, but it was clear that’s who he was talking about. “What if Narcissa and Lucius left with Draco?”

“You called, Headmaster,” Snape said suddenly, arriving in the kitchen at exactly the right moment, as if he’d been listening at the door.

“Ah, Professor Snape. Apt timing as always,” Dumbledore said cheerfully. Snape wasn’t listening though. He was staring at Regulus in mild surprise — practically a look of horrified shock on anyone else. “Quite a surprise, I know.”

It didn’t take long to get Snape up to speed, but the look of mild surprise never left his face. Finally, once he was caught up, he said, “Narcissa would never agree to come here. She doesn’t trust us.”

“But she wants Draco to be safe, surely she has to know that’s what we can offer,” Regulus responded.

“Perhaps she might have felt that way prior to Bellatrix’s death, but now...” Snape shrugged condescendingly. Regulus gave him a suspicious look, trying to figure out if he knew how Bellatrix had died, if he knew who had killed her. If Snape knew, then did Dumbledore? Regulus wasn’t willing to bring it up regardless.

“Draco will have to come to us on his own,” Dumbledore said.

“That’s not good enough,” Regulus responded. “He’s just a kid, and he’s got to be scared. If the Dark Lord marks him, then he might feel like he has no other options.”

“We could still offer him shelter if he asked for it,” Dumbledore added, though Regulus could tell his heart wasn’t in it. Though he clearly felt bad for Draco, it wasn’t enough to go to lengths to save him. The thought made him angry but yelling at Dumbledore wouldn’t help anyone.

“It doesn’t matter what’s possible if he doesn’t know,” Regulus said evenly. “With the Mark —”

“The Mark is irrelevant,” Dumbledore responded.

“It’s not,” Regulus interrupted. “It won’t feel like that to him.” He turned to look at Snape. “Is there a way to convince the Dark Lord not to mark him?”

“I cannot change the Dark Lord’s mind,” Snape said.

“What is he asking of Draco?” Regulus asked. Snape’s eyes flicked over to Dumbledore, so quickly that Regulus thought he might have imagined it.

“I don’t know,” Snape lied.

“It’s something that requires him to go back to Hogwarts, right?” Regulus guessed. Snape shrugged, but that was answer enough. “Maybe... maybe if he believes Draco can do a better job without a detectable Mark, then he will let him go another year without it.”

“Would that have worked when he marked you?” Snape asked. Regulus flinched.

“No,” Regulus said. “My family wasn’t in good standing after Sirius ran away.”

“And you believe the Malfoys are?”

“I know they’re not, but I was never given a task. If Draco is trying to accomplish something, then the Mark can only hurt him. Please, you have to try.”

Snape gave him a long blank look, and Regulus could only hope that behind his empty eyes, he was considering it.

“It might be possible, but it might not,” Snape said.

“When does he plan to mark him?”

“Soon,” Snape said quickly.

There wasn’t much else to say, and Snape left before Dumbledore, so Regulus did not get a chance to speak with him alone. He doubted he would at all until school was back in session given Snape’s undercover status. Dumbledore clearly wanted to ask Regulus something, probably related to how he managed to come back to life, but he left without doing so.

He wanted to do more for Draco, but he didn’t know what he could do.

If he had Kreacher kidnap Draco, then there was always the possibility that Draco would run and tell the Dark Lord, then they would all be dead. Or he would stay and choose people he barely knew over his parents who would die for his betrayal.

He could get Kreacher to bring him temporarily, or take Regulus there — if their wards even still allowed Kreacher to go in and out, which Regulus seriously doubted — so that they could speak but that would just put Draco at risk. The Dark Lord was a skilled Legilimens, and Regulus doubted that Draco had the Occlumency skills to keep him out.

It felt like watching himself take the Mark all over again, he was helpless to stop it and could do nothing except go through the motions waiting for the Sword of Damocles to fall on his neck. He was wallowing about it in the empty kitchen when Sirius found him.

“Did you figure things out with Dumbledore? Are you going back to school?” Sirius asked as he walked past where Regulus was sitting and headed over toward the stove.

“Huh?” Regulus asked. “No, that wasn’t what I was talking to him about. Why did you think that? I said that I was talking to him about Draco.”

Sirius shrugged, flicking the stove on. “I figured he would have a solution to the whole being-too-old problem. Not to mention the everyone-thinks-you’re-dead problem. He could probably help out with that.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “I had more important things to discuss with him than whether I would be in attendance for sixth year,” he said dismissively. “There is no use going back anyway, I can do more good here.”

“You’re not going back to Hogwarts?” Harry asked, sounding devastated. Regulus hadn’t noticed him opening the kitchen door, but he was standing there now.

“Harry,” Regulus said, grinning instantly, though it faltered when Harry’s eyes welled with tears. “What’s wrong?”

“Is it because of me?” Harry said miserably.

“Is what because of you?” Regulus asked frantically, standing up so that he could walk toward Harry, but Harry took a step back.

“Because of what I did. Because it’s my fault you died. Is that why you’re not going back to school?” Harry asked. Sirius had frozen in place by the stove, and Regulus could feel him watching the exchange.

“Harry, no —”

But Harry was already gone, barreling up the stairs, back to his bedroom. Regulus watched him go, feeling helpless.

“What was that about?” Regulus asked, his chest tight with worry.

Sirius cringed slightly. “It’s been a really hard summer.”

the ring.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Harry,” Regulus called, knocking softly on his bedroom door.

Sirius hadn’t been kidding about how hard Harry had taken his death, not that he thought he was, but it was just unexpected to see Harry’s grief so clearly splayed out in front of him. Regulus didn’t quite understand how Harry’s guilt had convinced him to take Regulus not returning to Hogwarts as a personal failing on Harry’s part, but obviously, that’s what had happened. It made Regulus feel sick when he thought about it.

“I’m going to go talk to him,” Regulus had said to Sirius when Harry left the room.

“Go easy on him,” Sirius responded, turning away to look at the stove again.

“Why do you assume I’m going to be hard on him? I’m never hard on him.”

Sirius shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s sensitive.”

“I know him better than you do,” Regulus mumbled, so quiet that he was sure Sirius couldn’t hear him.

“Harry,” Regulus repeated when Harry didn’t respond. He knocked again, harder this time. “Can I come in?”

There was a long pause, and then Harry’s muffled voice came through the closed door. “Yeah.”

Regulus opened the door slowly, unsure of what he would find, but Harry was just sitting on the side of the bed, his sock-covered feet hanging off and kicking slightly. His eyes were rimmed red, but he wasn’t actively crying.

“Hey,” Harry said softly.

“Can we talk?” Regulus asked. He felt like he was standing on the edge of a cliff, unsure of how to proceed.

“Yeah,” Harry said, though he shrugged like it didn’t matter to him either way. “I’m sorry about earlier. It’s fine if you don’t want to go back to Hogwarts.” He looked down at his feet, kicking them twice before freezing.

Regulus frowned and came to sit next to Harry on the bed. He sighed. “It’s not because of you,” Regulus said. “I’m not upset with you, Harry. Not even a little bit.”

Harry’s body tensed, and his breathing cut off like he couldn’t trust himself with oxygen. He didn’t look at Regulus. His eyes didn’t sway from where they were glued to his feet. His

glasses were smudged like he hadn't been taking care of them, and it was difficult to make out his expression behind them. Regulus waited impatiently for Harry to speak again.

"How can you not be?" Harry whispered, quiet as the summer wind blowing lightly against the windows. "It's my fault."

"It's Bellatrix's fault," Regulus countered. He exhaled sharply when Harry didn't respond. "You made a mistake when you left Hogwarts without waiting for me to get back, but I don't blame you for doing what you did. I love Sirius too, though I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell him that, and if I truly thought he was in danger then I would have done anything to keep him alive."

Harry's breath hitched, but he didn't make another sound. His lips didn't so much as twitch at Regulus's pathetic joke.

"You have to remember that you didn't go there based on nothing. The Dark Lord and his followers have been working against you. A group of grown men and women were trying specifically to trick you."

"But you figured it out," Harry said, his voice rough and scratchy, "didn't you? You knew that Sirius wasn't actually in danger, that we could have just waited or sent Aurors or something."

"Yes, but I had more information than you did. There was no way you could have known what I did." Regulus knocked their shoulders together, hoping that Harry would look up at him, but his eyes stayed resolutely glued to his feet.

"Then why aren't you going back to school? If you're not mad at me." Harry added the caveat like he didn't believe it. Regulus wondered if Harry was just waiting for the other shoe to drop, if he was waiting for him to finally show his anger.

"I'm too old," Regulus explained. Harry did look up then, a confused look on his face.

"Weren't you always too old to be at school with me?"

Regulus let out a shocked laugh. "Yes, I suppose you're right about that," Regulus said. "But before I at least looked the part. I've aged though. I don't look sixteen anymore."

Harry gave him a once-over. He nodded like he was accepting Regulus's reason, his cheek twitching slightly. Regulus forced himself not to slump in defeat. Harry wasn't asking him to go back, not explicitly, but he could see that no matter how many times he said it, Harry would still believe that he was at fault, and would still think that Regulus blamed him.

"You'll probably have more fun this year if I'm not around," Regulus said. Harry looked offended. "What? Having an adult living in your dorm hasn't been keeping you from the freedom of Hogwarts?"

"No, it hasn't," Harry said immediately, firmly. "Not that I have anything to compare it to," he muttered, "you've always been there. I don't know anything else."

“Maybe it’ll be a good thing then,” Regulus said.

“But what about everyone else? What will they think when you don’t come back?” Harry asked. He sounded like he was trying to feign disinterest, but there was a whining in his voice that tugged at Regulus's chest.

“Your friends know I’m alive, and they’ll see me on breaks.”

“My friends?” Harry asked loudly.

“Erm, yeah,” Regulus said, confused.

“They’re your friends too!” Regulus chuckled sadly, intent on disagreeing, but Harry must have seen it on his face. “Ron stole from Sirius and broke into the Ministry to bring you back. Hermione helped him. How can you say they’re not your friends?”

“They did those things for you, Harry, not for me,” Regulus said gently.

“They did it for both of us,” Harry snapped, jumping to his feet. “And I think you abandoning them because you think you’re too old for Hogwarts is a poor way of repaying them.”

“I *am* too old for Hogwarts.”

“That’s irrelevant,” Harry said.

“It’s not. Harry, they’ll understand.”

“Oh, of course they will,” Harry said sarcastically. “What about m—” He cut off with a sound of frustration. “Whatever. Just do whatever you want.”

“Harry —”

“I don’t think I want to talk anymore today,” Harry said, stomping into his bathroom and slamming the door shut behind him, leaving Regulus in the empty bedroom. He was shocked to see such explosive anger coming from Harry, especially since it was directed at him.

He waited a bit to see if Harry would reemerge from his bathroom, but it quickly became clear that Harry wasn’t coming back. Or at the very least was waiting for Regulus to leave before he came back. He left the room and thought about going downstairs to update Sirius, or maybe try to figure out what to do, but decided against it. He couldn’t believe it was still his first day, it had felt so long already.

He walked to his bedroom, feeling tired and stressed, hoping that he might find some peace there, but instead, he felt like he was being entombed. His bedroom had sat empty as a hallmark to his life after both of his deaths. When he returned the first time, he felt like he was a living ghost, floating through an empty house, searching for meaning which he found by seeking Harry out and trying to keep him safe.

Now, he sensed that directionless feeling again, inching into his conscious thoughts like morning fog drifting in to obscure the day. He huffed and threw himself onto his bed. He

hadn't thought about what his life meant or why he was back the first time around. He wanted to keep James's son alive, to keep him safe, out of loyalty and love for James. He'd done his best, but he couldn't be sure that he'd really helped all that much.

What would be his purpose now? Where could he go from here that would give him purpose? Beyond killing the Dark Lord, there was no other goal that could satiate him. After the Dark Lord was dead — and Regulus hoped that that would happen soon — what would become of him?

Although he could feel his body, and the small bits of pain that still lingered there, he still felt like he was trapped beyond the veil, floating through nothingness, nonexistent. He wondered if it would have been better had he not returned. It all felt insurmountable, and he didn't know where to go from here.

He thought about Harry. Harry had been changed, fundamentally, from the boy that Regulus had once known. That young boy that Regulus met in first year was long gone, structurally reborn from guilt and grief. It was like when Regulus had been forced to take the Mark, when he talked himself into believing that it was the right move, that it was what he wanted, and then James left him because of it. He was never the same after that. A hole was carved in his soul, hollowing him out and turning him into a shell of himself.

The same thing had happened to Harry, and though Regulus had been given an absurd turn of luck and was alive once again, Harry would never forget the way his guilt had eaten him alive. Regulus couldn't help thinking of Draco too, poor Draco, left alone with the responsibility of his family on his shoulders. Would he ever be the same after this summer? Regulus doubted it.

How did his return help either of them? How did it help Ron or Hermione? Even Sirius didn't seem to need him. He had moved on after Regulus died. At least, to the best of his ability. Though murder wasn't typical in most cycles of grief, Regulus imagined, Sirius had still found a way to move forward.

He was adopting Harry. That news felt good to hear, but at the same time, there was something sour about it. It was almost like jealousy that this monumental moment between Harry and Sirius had happened when Regulus was gone. He was sad that he had missed it and even more upset that it would be tainted by his death.

He wondered if there was also a small jewel of jealousy because Sirius was the one who got to adopt Harry and not him. He shook those feelings away as quickly as possible, not interested in considering how James might feel about Regulus wanting to adopt his son. James chose Sirius for a reason. He would never have wanted Regulus there.

James. Merlin, that name felt like trying to cuddle into a bed that was too cold. It was comfort and pain all rolled into one unique feeling. Did he know that Regulus had died? He didn't know if death worked like that, especially veil-related death.

He thought about the last time he'd seen James when he'd talked about his patronus and Lily. Regulus hadn't wanted to see or speak to him then, he hadn't even wanted to think about him, but now... He missed him. Terribly. He felt lonely before his death, but now it felt worse

because he felt like his life was meaningless. There was an awful isolation tied up in that experience that he didn't want to talk about with anyone. No one except for James.

He was in the process of searching for him before he even consciously decided to do so. He missed James, and although he was still hurt, would always be hurt, by what he said, he knew that James would listen. James would know what to do about Harry. He quickly realized something was wrong. Something was different, at least. Before, even after James disappeared for the final time, he could still sense him. Not actively, not when he was thinking about him, but it was like the magic that flowed from inside him was intricately intertwined with James, with his very essence.

But now...

Where was he? He sat up in alarm, his heart speeding up slightly. He closed his eyes and searched for him again. Then again. And again. Nothing. He was gone. James was not just dead, he was gone from Regulus. Removed.

He jumped out of bed and went to find Sirius. He found him alone in the kitchen, reading *The Daily Prophet* and chewing on his thumbnail that was already bitten down to the quick.

"Hey, where is the Horcrux that Dumbledore gave you?"

Sirius looked up in surprise. "Erm, it's in my bedside table. I haven't touched it since Ron mentioned that he stole part of it to bring you back."

"Okay, thanks," Regulus said quickly. He heard Sirius asking him what was doing, but he didn't respond, rushing up the stairs to Sirius's room. He stalked toward the bedside table, ripping it open, and pulling out the ring. It had been cracked where the stone that Ron stole was once attached to it.

He knew that Dumbledore said he'd already destroyed it and that it wasn't likely to cause a reaction now that the Dark Lord's soul was gone. He also knew that it was stupid to wish that the Dark Lord's soul was still attached to it somehow, that it wasn't actually destroyed. That was foolish and ridiculous. Yet he felt that yearning for the detrimental effects he would feel around Horcruxes, the effects that had once brought James forward.

Instead, he found silence.

He wondered if he would still react to Horcruxes the same way as before, or did his second death and rebirth change that? For the first time in a long time, he thought about the Norse ritual he'd used years ago, the one that first brought James into his second life.

I could do it again, his thoughts whispered treacherously.

"What are you doing?" Sirius asked. He was standing by the bedroom door watching as Regulus stared forlornly down at the vacant ring.

"I was checking to see if it was still a Horcrux," Regulus said.

"Oh, right," Sirius said. "I forgot about that. Well, is it?"

“No,” Regulus said. “I don’t think so. Do you know anything about the stone that Ron stole?”

Sirius shook his head slightly. “Not really. Dumbledore asked me about it. It seemed like he wanted it back eventually, but I don’t know what it was.”

“He wanted it back?”

Sirius shrugged. “That’s what it seemed like. When he first gave it to me, he said it was so that you could see it, but he kept, I don’t know, looking at the stone like it intrigued him.”

That’s weird, Regulus thought. “What did the stone look like?”

“It was just a stone,” Sirius replied. “Sort of angular and odd looking. It was built into the ring, I think, part of Voldemort’s family history.”

“The Gaunts?”

“Suppose so,” Sirius said.

“Huh,” Regulus said thoughtfully.

“What?”

“It’s just weird that Ron was able to bring me back with a bunch of half-baked runes and a loose stone.”

“Half-baked?”

“I’m assuming,” Regulus said. “I didn’t actually look at them. But you’d think if it was possible to pull people from the veil, the Unspeakables would have done it a long time ago.”

“Maybe not,” Sirius said. “I mean, it did destroy the entire death chamber, they could have assumed it was too dangerous.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Regulus said. “Although if I’m the first person to come back, you would think they would want to study me. I mean, if I was an Unspeakable I’d want to study me.”

“You’re just obsessed with yourself.”

“I am not,” Regulus said offendedly. “If either of us is obsessed with ourselves, then it’s definitely you.”

“Rude,” Sirius sneered, a wave of mirth in his eyes. The humor and sneer fled from his face a second later. “Did you talk to Harry?”

Regulus sighed. “He’s mad that I’m not going back.”

“Understandable,” Sirius said.

Regulus threw his hands out to either side. “What do you mean it’s understandable?”

“Well, he just got you back. If James died and came back, I would be mad that I had to be separated from him. Especially if he was choosing to stay home while I had to go back to school. I would feel betrayed,” Sirius said with surprising honesty.

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Harry and I are not like you and James.”

“Are you not?” Sirius asked. “You guys spend a lot of time together, you care about each other, you go on adventures together.”

“We do not go on adventures,” Regulus argued.

“You became animagi together.”

“Yes, well, you and James were impossible to separate. You two were obsessed with each other. Honestly, I’m surprised you and Remus were the ones who ended up dating.”

“I did consider James, but only for a brief time in second year,” Sirius said, crossing his arms thoughtfully.

“Bleh,” Regulus said, sticking his tongue in disgust. “That’s gross. And it proves my point. I’ve never been interested in Harry because he’s a child.”

Sirius rolled his eyes dramatically. “I know that, but there are still a lot of similarities. I think you should consider that when deciding whether you should go back to Hogwarts.”

Regulus cringed slightly. “Can we just drop this?”

“Fine, but you should think about going back.”

“Okay.” He would actually have to think about it, he realized. He didn’t feel right making the final decision that day, not with everything else he was feeling.

“Now, I was thinking we would have a party,” Sirius said cheerfully.

“A party? Harry ran out of the room crying today, I hardly think he’s in a position to party.”

“He’ll be fine,” Sirius said easily. “He could use a distraction. He’s too cooped up in here.”

“Are you sure you’re not the one who’s too cooped up? Where is Remus anyway?”

Sirius’s eyes didn’t darken, despite the dig, but there was a twitch on his face that shone like a warning sign. “I don’t know. Guess he had something to do. Anyway, the party wouldn’t be for Harry. It would be for you.”

“For me?”

“Don’t be stupid, Reggie.”

“Don’t call me Reggie.”

“Your friends will be thrilled when they find out you aren’t dead,” Sirius went on as if he hadn’t heard Regulus.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Regulus said. “Large crowds aren’t exactly the safest things right now.”

“It’ll be fine. We’re safe here, no one will get hurt.”

Regulus sighed again. He really was exhausted. If he could just sleep for a few days, or weeks maybe, he was sure he’d feel better. Why had he even bothered to get out of bed that morning?

“Fine, but only if Harry agrees. I don’t want to overwhelm him.”

Sirius grinned broadly, all of his teeth glinting on display in a show reminiscent of his animagus self. Regulus already regretted this plan.

Chapter End Notes

i just wanted to explain really quickly that regulus's nerve pain/damage is a separate thing from his damaged magical core. they happened at the same time, but one of them is metaphysical in nature and the other is a physical injury.

the wolves.

Chapter Notes

cw: reference to a teenage girl being interested in remus, nothing happens between them. also, there is a reference to werewolves having sex with each other in werewolf form.

Remus woke to a sharp pain in his side. He gasped in pain as his eyes shot open. He wasn't alone, he remembered abruptly, surrounded instead by a pack of healing werewolves. He always hated waking up like this, huddled in a pack like they were more animal than human.

"You're always trying to run from the wolf inside you. You need to let him out. He is fighting for control, and sometimes you have to let him win. If you don't, then he's going to overpower you when you least expect it," Clea told him once. She was a young werewolf when he first met her during the first war, only fifteen, yet she was already leading a small group of wolves all on her own. He disregarded her then, and after Voldemort fell, he put her out of his mind.

Now that he had returned to the London packs, Clea was on his mind again. She wasn't with them, hadn't been in at least half a decade, based on the limited information he could gather, though he couldn't figure out where she'd gone after leaving London. He wondered if she was still alive. No one would give him a clear answer.

He often found himself thinking about her and her advice on handling his wolf. He hadn't grown up in a pack, so he didn't have the same feelings toward lycanthropy as she did. At the time, he was anxious to deny her. His wolf was a monster, a ravenous beast who would kill anyone in his path, and he would die before he gave up control. Now, as he approached forty, he wondered if he should have listened.

He spent years denying his lycanthropy, putting all his energy into the parts of himself that were purely human. Three full moons with the London pack and he was back to an animal, naked in a pile of warm bodies, healing from a night of running, fighting, and fucking. Presumably at least. He had no memory of it, having given up his wolfsbane while with the wolves. They would never trust him if they discovered he was taking it.

Not that they trusted him now. He was an outsider. A trained wizard who had been living in the wizarding and muggle worlds for years. Most of the London pack had been living full-time as werewolves for a long time.

Remus, on the other hand, spent the August full moon with the wolves for the first time in a decade. He left without telling Sirius, but the moment he got back, he could tell that Sirius was angry with him.

"Where were you?" Sirius asked bitinglly.

"Dumbledore asked me to go see the werewolves." There was no point in lying, not this time around.

"What?" Sirius yelled. Remus cringed slightly.

"He needs someone on the inside."

"No," Sirius said sharply. "This is ridiculous. You're going to get yourself killed."

"Sirius."

"No, you can't."

"It's not up to you what I do," Remus said firmly. It was the wrong thing to say, he could see that instantly from the way Sirius's face paled, then turned dark like storm clouds.

"Right," he said.

"I have to go. Voldemort is going to start getting desperate for allies now that Bellatrix is dead and most of his Death Eaters are in Azkaban," Remus argued. Sirius glared at him fiercely but didn't fight him on it. Remus should have taken that for the warning sign that it was. If Sirius didn't fight back, then something was wrong.

They barely spoke after that, except for when they discussed everything with the Lestranges, and now it was nearly December, and it had been months of tense silence, broken only by Dora's repeated visits that were only making things more complicated.

He wasn't exactly happy about being with them, but Dumbledore had asked him to do it, and he never felt like he could say no to Dumbledore. The man had given him an opportunity to attend Hogwarts, he'd given him his life. He couldn't deny him now that he was asking for his help.

Regardless, he couldn't help but think of the ways this plan had destroyed his life last time around. He'd been spending too much time with the werewolf packs during the first war. Sirius had been neglected and had grown unstable and distrustful. Remus once blamed the werewolves for Sirius turning dark. That turned out to be untrue, but he still blamed them for the way he was able to believe Sirius was a spy — if only to deflect blame off himself for a little longer.

He sat up slowly, hissing out a breath as the wound on his side protested the movement. There was a man half on top of him that Remus had to shift off to the side. He had long black hair, similar to Sirius's, and it disturbed him to see it splayed out on his naked and scarred chest. He did so gently so as not to wake him. He knew he should stay with the pack longer — healing together after the moon was when werewolves did most of their bonding — but he just couldn't manage it this time around.

The first moon he spent back with them he'd woken to find that he was being watched by one specific member of the pack. He stuck around for two days, avoiding her attentive eyes,

before leaving.

He stayed a week the second time, but when she made a move on him he ran out like someone had lit the building on fire. She had fiery red hair — a color that would have once made him think of Lily, but now disturbingly made him think of Ginny Weasley — she was young, no older than seventeen.

Young werewolves who ended up abandoned by their families often had to grow up quickly and act much older than they really were. This didn't shake him much when he was in his early twenties, just a young man himself, but as a man in his late thirties, seeing a young girl who resembled Ginny Weasley throw him suggestive looks, the reality of her life made him begin to feel sick.

"She was changed by Greyback," Zariah told him last time around. "Most of us were. He took us in when our families left us."

"Where is he now? Does he not lead the pack anymore?" Remus asked. Zariah was in charge of the London pack, as far as he could tell.

"He's building a pack outside of the city," Zariah said with a smirk, his glittering blue eyes predatory, some unspoken hunger beneath them that Remus wasn't sure he wanted to understand. Zariah knew he didn't belong, and Remus could already tell that he would never get into Zariah's good graces.

Remus caught a glimpse of the red hair as he snuck out of the building. The girl was sleeping in between two other girls her age, cuddled up with them for warmth and comfort.

His chest felt tight when he thought about Greyback changing a girl so young and taking her from her home. So many members of the London pack were like that. Too young, too innocent, to have such a harsh life thrust upon them.

He couldn't deal with it, hence the sneaking out right after the moon.

"Leaving so soon?" Opal asked. She was second to Zariah. She was a bit younger than Remus, but had only been a werewolf for a few years and therefore wasn't prematurely aged by the wolf's rage. She had dark skin, and when she was human, even darker eyes, but now there was a permanent ring of gold around them that gave her an ethereal appearance.

"Yes," he responded to her, very quietly. She was leaning against the wall next to the door, watching over the pack, keeping them all safe.

"You don't belong here with us," she said. It wasn't the first time he'd heard a werewolf say those exact words to him, but she was the first one to say them kindly. "I can tell you have someone waiting on you."

"I just want to help," Remus said honestly. He wasn't a help to any of them though, just another poor werewolf in a world that hated them.

“I know,” Opal said with a small smile, there for a second and gone the next. “See you next month.”

He nodded to her and left the house. Remus was pretty sure it was abandoned and that the wolves were just squatting there because of the land nearby. He breathed a sigh of relief once he was out in the cold, the November air cutting against his exposed skin. He summoned his trousers and jacket that he’d left outside the night before and dressed quickly before apparating to the front steps of Grimmauld.

The old house was deathly still and silent this early in the morning. It was like that most days now that Regulus and Harry had returned to school. Remus hadn’t been surprised when Regulus decided to return to Hogwarts for his sixth year, but he had been surprised by how hard Sirius had taken it.

“It’s good that he’s with Harry,” Sirius said miserably the night after they left for school. His mood was already darkening now that he was alone. It would just get worse as the months went on.

“You know you don’t have to stay here anymore, right? You’re free now. You’re not trapped in this house,” Remus said, hoping to lighten the mood.

Sirius just shrugged and looked away. There was something he was keeping from Remus, some treacherous feeling that had turned the tide of his feelings away from Remus. Sometimes, Remus would notice Sirius watching him, but the moment he looked over, Sirius’s eyes would dart away quickly, his eyebrows furrowing angrily.

Remus tiptoed upstairs to the bedroom he’d been staying in. He thought about waking Sirius, about maybe crawling into bed with him and curling around his warm body. They hadn’t kissed since the day Bellatrix died in July, but Remus thought about it every single day.

He didn’t go into Sirius’s room though, too worried about being rebuked to put himself out there. Instead, he crawled into the cold bed in one of the guest bedrooms — it never quite felt like his.

He fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. When he woke again, he could tell that it had been at least a day since he’d arrived at Grimmauld. His recovery time from the full moon was getting longer the older he got.

He took stock of his body. He was shirtless and was now wearing a pair of pajama bottoms rather than the old trousers he’d worn to meet the werewolves. The wound on his chest had been dressed and a bandage was wrapped around his torso. It was obviously Sirius’s work. Remus let his fingers drift along the soft bandage, imagining Sirius’s deft fingers working to heal him, to save him some pain, while he slept.

It was the thought of Sirius that made him get out of bed. Very little else could make him move in the morning, but he needed to see him. Sirius was pacing the living room when Remus walked in.

“Hey,” Remus greeted. Sirius looked at him for a split second before glancing away. “Thanks for this, it feels a lot better.” He gestured to his chest.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sirius mumbled. He’d never been very good at lying, especially to Remus. Remus smiled slightly, a tender feeling inside him growing as he watched Sirius pace.

“Okay,” he agreed magnanimously. If Sirius wasn’t ready to talk about it, then Remus wasn’t going to push him. He left him to his pacing, going to make himself breakfast only to discover that food had already been made and was sitting in the kitchen under a heating charm.

He ate ravenously, reading idly over the papers from the last few days. He felt like the year was moving too quickly. He could barely believe that it was only a little under a month until Regulus and Harry would be back for Christmas.

Regulus’s return from the veil had been a shock. When he first came back, Remus made himself scarce so that Regulus could fall back into place with Sirius and Harry. When he came back a few days later, Sirius had turned against him. That’s how it felt at least.

“Where have you been?” Sirius hissed at him.

“I just wanted to give you your space,” Remus answered, he’d been smiling a moment ago, but now his face dropped into one of surprise.

While Sirius seemed to accept this explanation, they still hadn’t fallen back into step with each other. Leading up to Bellatrix’s death it almost felt like they were getting close again. It was as if their orbits were finally aligned and some unseen force was pulling them in. Now it felt like they had been knocked off course and Remus couldn’t understand why.

Remus stayed in the house for a bit after that, but he hung back from all interactions. He felt like he was an imposition. When he’d arrived back, they were a few hours away from having a party in Regulus’s honor. Harry was sulking moodily in his bedroom and Regulus kept shooting anxious looks at the stairs that led to Harry’s room. Remus didn’t know what was going on and wouldn’t find out until a few days later.

The party itself was uproarious and exciting. Everyone seemed elated to see Regulus. Luna threw herself at him in a rare show of emotion that Remus didn’t think he’d ever see. He was too far away to hear what Regulus was saying to her, but he could see that Regulus was whispering in her ear as her shoulders shook slightly.

That was the first night that Remus got the opportunity to talk to Ron about how he’d done it.

“I’m sorry I stole from Sirius,” Ron said immediately when Remus pulled him aside. Remus held in a laugh.

“I know, it’s okay,” Remus replied. “I was wondering if you could explain to me how you did it.”

Ron stumbled through an explanation that only half made sense, and Remus ended up just asking to borrow the books that Ron had used: *A Soul's Match* by Alvina Ackerly and a book on Runes that was handwritten and barely legible. He thanked Ron and let him rejoin the party.

All the Weasleys were there as were several other Hogwarts students from Harry's year. The only two Weasleys missing were Percy, who hadn't spent time with his family in months, and Charlie who was back in Romania.

Remus was thankful for it then, but that thankfulness had fled when he found a long letter from Charlie among the letters for Sirius a few days later. Apparently, the two were in consistent communication with each other, and Charlie had been inviting Sirius out to Romania for a visit.

Remus knew he didn't have a right to feel jealous, but he couldn't help the possessiveness that raced through him when he pictured Charlie smiling at Sirius, his eyes sparkling with interest. There was a part of Remus, a part that was growing by the day, that understood that Sirius would probably move on with his life now that he was a free man, no longer bound by his wanted status, but Remus didn't know that he was capable of watching Sirius move onto someone else.

After the party for Regulus, the rest of the summer was spent mostly preparing for Hogwarts. Regulus decided a week after the party that he would return to Hogwarts to get his N.E.W.T.s despite his appearance. When Remus saw the way Harry's shoulders dropped away from his ears, he finally understood what his moodiness was about.

A few days after Regulus announced that he would be returning, Dumbledore showed up asking to borrow Harry. Sirius seemed happy to oblige as long as Harry was okay with it, which he was, but Regulus instantly demanded that they be told what Dumbledore was planning to do. Remus was surprised to see Regulus react so sharply to Dumbledore, but he decided against questioning him about it.

"I have reason to believe that Tom Riddle's Potions professor may have information regarding the Horcruxes," Dumbledore explained once Harry was sent out of the room.

"Which professor? Slughorn?" Sirius asked, his eyebrows furrowed so intensely that his eyes were half-shadowed.

"Yes, he was just a young man then, but Tom may have trusted him enough to come to him with questions. I need him to come back to Hogwarts."

"So you're using Harry to do that?" Regulus asked, though he surprisingly did not sound angry. If anything, he sounded mildly impressed.

"Why Harry?" Remus asked.

"Oh right, you were never in the Slug Club," Regulus said. "Slughorn was always obsessed with collecting students, especially ones that had ties to powerful families or famous wizards or witches."

“Ugh, I forgot you were a part of that,” Sirius said in disgust.

“I think it’s fine if Harry goes with you, but you have to tell him why. Leave out the Horcruxes, he doesn’t need to know about that, but the rest. I don’t want him to be lied to if he doesn’t have to be,” Regulus replied, ignoring Sirius’s comment.

Harry was only with Dumbledore for a little over an hour, but he came back complaining about how annoying Slughorn was.

“Did you know that he knew my mum? He kept talking about how bright she was even though she was *muggleborn*,” he said, adding air quotes to the last word.

“Slughorn was always a slimy bastard,” Sirius said. “He seemed a little interested in me until I was disowned, then he never spoke to me again. He was obsessed with Regulus though.”

“Let’s not dwell on it,” Regulus mumbled, looking embarrassed.

“Were you in his club with my mum?” Harry asked.

Regulus’s face grew unusually pale, and something flashed across his eyes, a sort of yawning chasm of pain. He buried it behind fortified Occlumency walls quickly, his eyes growing blank as he responded, “Yes, I was.”

Harry frowned at Regulus and gave him a look that almost seemed like pity before changing the subject. Remus and Sirius shared a confused look, but they didn't get another chance to talk about it.

They went to Diagon Alley the next day to get the school supplies that Harry and Regulus needed, and to visit the Weasley Twins' new shop, which was amazingly busy given the barren wasteland that was the rest of Diagon. Remus was going to go with them but was sidetracked that morning when Dora arrived.

“I can’t believe that Regulus is really back,” Dora said once Sirius and the others left. He could tell from the unhappy looks that Sirius was throwing her that this wouldn’t bode well for Remus, still he couldn’t just tell her to go away. He wasn’t that cruel.

“It’s amazing,” Remus responded with a smile. “We all missed him a lot.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” Dora said, settling down on the couch in the living room. She left enough room for Remus to sit next to her, but he opted to sit across the room in one of the wide-backed chairs, just in case Sirius came back while they were talking.

It felt odd to spend time alone with her now that so much of what Remus was worried about had come and gone. Sirius was freed and wouldn’t be killed by Aurors the moment he stepped foot outside Grimmauld. Regulus was back, adding stability to both Sirius's and Harry’s lives.

There was still the looming issue of Voldemort, rising to power and getting more dangerous every day, but that felt so far removed from Remus’s day-to-day life that he barely worried

about it. Even with the prospect of returning to the werewolves, he still wasn't worried. That didn't mean everyone else wasn't worried though.

"Oh, you're going to stay with them?" Dora asked, clearly concerned. Last time around, Remus hadn't told anyone that he was visiting the werewolves. Eventually, he told Sirius after he had to leave for a full moon — Sirius was bound to notice that absence — but beyond that, he kept all the other information about his time with the werewolves to himself.

Sirius had been angry about it, had stopped trusting him along the way, and Remus knew he would most likely be angry again when Remus told him about his plan to join them once again. Dora wasn't angry though, she just looked upset and mildly disappointed.

"Yes, so I'm not sure when I'll be back," he said. It was just a white lie, though his schedule might be slightly unpredictable, he was also likely to return to Grimmauld after every full moon.

"Oh," she said, finally seeming to understand what he was saying. "I see. Well, I wanted to ask you something." Her hair rapidly changed colors as she spoke, changing to a dull brown when she looked disappointed, to a bright red when she regained her confidence.

He swallowed uncomfortably. "What was that?"

"Well, I thought perhaps — you see, I wanted to ask — okay, so I wanted to —"

"Dora, slow down," Remus said kindly, though anxious energy was beginning to flick up his spine.

"I looked up when the next full moon is, and it's not for two weeks, so I thought maybe you'd like to go on a date... with me," she added the last two words like they weren't obvious. Remus froze in panic. He saw this coming, and he should have diverted it a long time ago, but he didn't and now it was right in front of him and he had no plan for dealing with it.

"Oh," he said slowly. "Listen, Dora, I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?" she asked, her hair growing even redder as she spoke.

"I won't be around much in the coming months and honestly, I think — I think you could find someone better than me."

"Better? What do you mean?" She sounded offended.

"I'm an old man, Dora."

"You're not that old."

"I am compared to you," he said quickly. "And I'm an unemployed werewolf. I'm not exactly the kind of man —"

"I don't care about that," she said.

“You will,” he said kindly.

“You say that now,” she said, jumping to her feet. Her hair was fading back to the dull brown now as disappointment overtook her face once again, but it flashed purple as she said, “I’ll win you over, Remus Lupin,” determinedly before stomping through the floo.

Remus fell back in his seat, breathing out a tired sigh. This wasn’t good at all. He had tried to let her down gently, but it was clear that wasn’t going to work. Things only got more complicated when Sirius, Regulus, and Harry returned from Diagon. Sirius looked so angry that he might start destroying furniture if anyone set him off. He didn’t even spare Remus a glance as he barreled past him and into the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” Remus asked Regulus who looked stressed and tired.

“We were accosted by two Aurors,” Regulus said quietly. “They just wanted to talk to me about Umbridge’s disappearance. It’s not a big deal.”

“If it’s not a big deal, then why is Sirius so upset?”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “He’s just play-pretending as if he’s still my protective older brother. It’s nothing.” Harry came through the floo last, and Regulus immediately turned to look at him sharply. “Harry, you cannot just go off like that. You could have been seriously hurt.”

“Just because you don’t care what Draco is up to, doesn’t mean that I don’t,” Harry said fiercely. He looked angry, genuinely angry, and Remus was surprised to see that Regulus didn’t so much as flinch. “He’s up to something. I told you what he said about Greyback.”

“Greyback?” Remus asked. He hadn’t heard that name in a long time, not since the first war. He had never met the man, only heard rumors about him, but he was sure that he had ties to the Death Eaters. Of course, once he was back with the London werewolves, he heard that name with disturbing frequency.

“Please, don’t encourage him,” Regulus said, rubbing his face.

Harry and Regulus started bickering again while Remus left to find Sirius. “Hey, are you okay?” he asked gently when he found him hunched over a kitchen counter, his back muscles tense under his wizard robes.

“There were a lot of cameras on me, I wasn’t expecting it,” Sirius mumbled.

“Think you’ll make the front page?” Remus joked, trying to lighten the mood.

Sirius chuckled softly. “Yeah, probably.”

Remus waited for him to go on, but when he didn’t, he said, “Tell me what happened with the Aurors.”

Sirius’s shoulders tensed even more. “They think he did something to Umbridge.” Sirius turned to look at him, his eyes anguished and worried. “What if they’re trying to get him arrested for something he didn’t do? What if it’s my fault because they had to let me go?”

“Sirius, breathe,” Remus said, taking a step forward and grabbing his shoulder to ground him. “I’m sure they’re just questioning everyone. Umbridge has been missing for months and Regulus was one of the last people to see her. They probably just want to make sure he doesn’t know anything. That’s all.”

“Right, right,” Sirius said. “And I’ll fight for him. I’ll make sure he doesn’t get sent to Azkaban.”

Remus felt a roll of guilt but swallowed it down, disconnecting from Sirius enough to give him space.

The next day they went to the Ministry so that Sirius could officially adopt Harry. Harry was jittery the entire morning. “You’re coming too, right?” he asked Remus.

“If you want me there,” Remus said simply.

“Yes, I want you there,” Harry said firmly. “Regulus isn’t coming,” he added in a whisper.

“He’s not?” Remus asked. He had seen Regulus getting ready that morning, so this news came as a surprise.

Harry shook his head. “He said he had an errand to run in the Ministry while I went with Sirius. Do you know what he was talking about?”

Yes, Remus thought but didn’t say. Regulus must be going to talk to the Aurors while Sirius was busy. “I’m sure it’s nothing,” Remus replied instead. “He probably just wants to give you and Sirius time together.”

Harry’s eyebrows furrowed. “But you’re going to come, right?”

“I just said that I would,” Remus replied with a smile. Harry relaxed, but only slightly.

The process was quick and easy, just a meeting with a low-level Ministry employee, a young woman who seemed completely infatuated with Sirius. She kept trying to flirt with him as he filled out the paperwork.

While Harry was nervous before it started, he looked delighted and like he was trying to hold back laughter by the end. Sirius just looked frazzled and mildly embarrassed by the attention. Remus was also entertained, though a little bit annoyed. Sirius was a handsome man, especially now that he could appear in public normally, but that didn’t mean that everyone had to make a move on him.

Regulus met them at home looking irritated though he was clearly trying to hide it. Remus just felt like he was imposing and left the three of them to it. After that, it was only a few weeks before Regulus and Harry were gone.

Now it was the end of November. Winter was on the way, fiercer than previous years it seemed. Remus wondered if Voldemort and his Death Eaters had something to do with the weather changing. It felt like every day was spent in the dark during the first war, but he would never know if that was the weather or just how he spent his life.

Remus dropped the copy of *The Daily Prophet* that he had been reading and picked up the pile of letters that had been delivered that morning and hadn't been opened yet. There was yet another one from Charlie, and Remus was in the middle of talking himself out of burning it to a crisp before it could be read when Sirius came running into the kitchen, startling Remus into dropping it.

“Someone's just entered LeStrange Manor.”

the arrival.

Remus and Sirius apparated to Lestrangle Manor and Sirius wished he had thought to borrow Harry's invisibility cloak before he left for school.

They had been back to the manor countless times, mostly to inspect the cursed objects that were littered around every corner. Sirius was a bit overwhelmed by it at first, but Charlie Weasley, upon hearing about their project, suggested that Sirius contact Bill, and from there it became easier. He knew that Bill was a curse breaker, though he was still very green, and he wasn't sure how willing he would be to help Sirius with something like this.

It turned out that Bill was, like many of the Weasleys, good-natured and open to offering assistance whenever it was asked of him. Sirius liked his company, and Remus seemed to like it even more, though he looked unhappy when Sirius first brought up the prospect.

"Charlie told you to ask him?" Remus had asked snidely. It was a bit jarring, and he never did figure out what Remus's issue was because once Bill joined them, Remus was nothing but polite.

They had been working slowly through the house, replacing most of the curses with wards that would alert Sirius to someone's presence.

"It would be too obvious to just remove the curses that are already on them," Bill had explained, patient as ever. "Most of these objects are really old, and I would bet half of them will fall apart the moment the curses are removed. Missing objects will alert someone the moment they arrive, and you won't have time to catch them."

"Good thinking," Remus said cheerfully and Bill smiled brightly at him.

They hadn't worked through even a quarter of the objects before Sirius was alerted that someone was there, but luckily it was enough that they wouldn't be in danger immediately after entering the front door. At least, not in danger from the objects. From whoever was inside though? That was anyone's guess.

They both crouched down the moment they landed on the grounds of Lestrangle Manor, and Remus threw a disillusionment charm over them as if it was second nature. Sirius shivered slightly, always a bit overwhelmed by the touch of Remus's magic.

"Do you hear anything?" Sirius asked. He looked over to see that Remus's eyes looked bright and alert, the gold ring more present than usual. It was unnerving and unbelievably attractive.

Slowly, Remus shook his head, but there was something about the look on his face like he sensed something that put Sirius even more on edge. "We need to be careful."

"Okay," Sirius responded.

They headed toward the manor slowly, silently, and Sirius's heart began to race. He hadn't been in a real battle since the Department of Mysteries — he didn't count their confrontation with Bellatrix. He had almost died in the last battle though. Regulus had actually died. He didn't feel as untouchable and invincible as he had during the first war. He felt very vulnerable. He felt even worse having Remus next to him. If something happened to Remus, he would never survive it.

The door was still removed from its hinges so they were able to move inside the manor without an issue. Once they were inside, Sirius expected to hear something, some movement or talking in the manor that would let him know someone was there, but there was nothing.

He wondered who it could be. Bill would know better than to alert them on accident, at least Sirius thought he would, and it wasn't like it could be Rabastan or Rodolphus unless there had been another mass breakout and Sirius had missed it. He doubted it. He thought about Azkaban every single day and checked the news obsessively. More than once he had considered just breaking into the prison himself and killing them, but the one time he brought it up, Remus reacted so harshly that Sirius had kept all his other plans to himself.

He looked over at Remus, barely visible with the disillusionment charm on him, and wondered what he was thinking.

"Upstairs," Remus whispered. Sirius nodded and slowly they worked their way up the staircase at the end of the hall. It had been one of the first things they removed a curse from given the necessity it served. Sirius couldn't help but wonder who had placed all the curses. They clearly didn't expect anyone friendly to come back, so then who was in the house?

When they were halfway up the stairs there was a crashing sound followed by a man swearing. Remus made an odd noise, a half-cut-off growl that seemed to come from the center of his chest. Sirius gave him a questioning look, but Remus just kept moving.

The second floor was far more dangerous than the first floor, they hadn't had the time to remove the curses up there, so Sirius and Remus had to be extra careful moving from one step to the next. The stairs opened to a long corridor that looked like it had been built in stretches, it seemed to change width after every door like someone had kept adding to the original house without any forethought.

"I don't think it's here," a man said. His voice was high-pitched and whiny like he was being threatened.

"Keep looking," another man growled back. "Rab said it would be here." A pause. "You two, why are you standing around? Find it."

There were a few more crashing sounds, Remus and Sirius tip-toeing down the hall the entire time, but they stopped moving when they heard a screech. Sirius hadn't heard a screech like that since he was in Azkaban. Sometimes other prisoners would forget about the dementors or perhaps they would have a semi-happy dream, and the dementors would swarm them. It was a truly terrifying experience that often left someone shaking and a little less human than they once were. It had only happened to Sirius three times, but each time was worse than the last.

“No,” one of the men said with despair, his voice choking out of him.

“It was cursed,” someone else added. *Obviously*, Sirius thought. He wondered if the person who had touched it was dead.

“Keep searching,” a different voice growled.

“But —” Whoever was about to protest cut off with a grunt as if they had been punched in the stomach.

“Let’s go,” Remus whispered. They came around the corner carefully, moving slowly, and found three men searching around the room, all with their backs to the door. It looked like it had once been an office, but it was disorganized and half-destroyed, the shattered window allowing rain and snow to batter the inside of the manor. Sirius didn’t recognize any of the men, but one of them was noticeably larger than the other two, bigger than even Remus maybe.

He felt Remus touch his arm then move away so Sirius moved in the opposite direction. They needed to disarm these men as quickly as possible so that they could figure out who they were. Sirius guessed that “Rab” probably meant Rabastan, so they had to be Death Eaters or at least, connected to the Death Eaters.

The two smaller men were on opposite sides of the bigger man who was in the center of the room. Sirius pointed his wand at the smaller one closest to him, intent on disarming and body-binding him, but before he could get a word out, the larger man turned sharply on his heel. Sirius froze, but it wasn’t him that the man was looking at.

He grunted out a spell that Sirius had never heard before, a bright blue curse that hit Remus square in the chest. Remus’s disillusionment charms failed, and Sirius heard the man closest to him gasp as both of them came into view.

“Expelliarmus,” Sirius said, disarming all three of them at once. He caught their wands easily. The man farthest away from him looked panicked, he was very young, only a few years older than Harry. He picked up a book that was lying on a shelf near his shoulder. It looked like he was going to throw it at Sirius, but the moment his skin touched it, he screamed.

Sirius could do nothing except watch in horror as the man’s flesh and muscles were peeled from his bones. He was dead in an instant. While Sirius was distracted, the man closest to him moved and body-slammed into him. Sirius dropped the wands he was holding as he fell heavily to the ground, only barely managing to hold onto his own. The man stole back his wand, pointing it directly at Sirius and throwing one to the larger man. Sirius pointed his wand back at the man, both of them gasping as they stared each other down.

“Remus Lupin,” the larger man growled. Sirius glanced at them out of the corner of his eye, unwilling to look away from the man in front of him. Remus was leaning heavily against the wall, panting, his face twisted in pain. The large man, Sirius realized for the first time now that he could see the side of his face, looked different than a regular human. He looked

wrong. His face was half covered in fur, and his eyes were a sickly yellow. His teeth looked sharp and too big for his head. "I heard you've been looking for me."

The man in front of Sirius cast a quick spell, whispering it under his breath, and Sirius blocked it without thinking, shooting back one of his own. The man blocked it, ending it with them back at a stalemate.

"Who are you?" Remus asked, his voice was strained. Sirius felt dizzy with anger and the desire to get them both out.

"You don't recognize me," the large man asked, mirth in his voice. "I would've thought you would remember me." He spoke lazily like every word out of his mouth wasn't worth his time. "Then again, I did look different the last time we met." He smirked cruelly and Sirius watched as Remus's face paled.

"You're Fenrir Greyback," Remus said. Sirius racked his brain for where he'd heard that name before. He couldn't remember. "How do you know me?"

"They told me you've been poking around my pack."

"Your pack?" Remus said, his voice haunted.

"But that's not where I know you from."

"How do you know me?" Remus repeated, but he looked like he was going to be sick as if something horrible had just dawned on him.

"I never forget one of my children. Tell me, how did your dear old dad take your transformation?"

Sirius was beyond confused, but Remus must have understood. His face twisted into anger and he finally lifted his wand, throwing two quick spells at Fenrir. Fenrir rolled to the side, dodging them with an easy agility that made Sirius nervous. Sirius dragged his eyes away now that they were fighting.

The man who was holding his wand at Sirius was smirking at Fenrir, fully distracted by the exchange, so Sirius was able to hit him with a few spells quickly. The man only blocked two before he fell to the ground with a dull thunk, the body-bind Sirius meant to cast earlier now firmly in place.

Fenrir and Remus were locked in a fierce battle, and Sirius could practically feel the magic in the air coming off both of them. Sirius cast a burning curse at Fenrir who grunted in pain. Fenrir's eyes flashed to him for a quick second before he cast an unknown spell at Remus, then another at the man Sirius had bound on the floor, and promptly disappeared.

Sirius ran to Remus instantly as he collapsed to his knees, panting heavily.

"Are you okay?" Sirius asked frantically.

"Fine," Remus ground out. "I need to go back to Grimmauld. I have to stop the bleeding."

Sirius felt the ground shifting under him as he thought of Remus bleeding, of him in pain. "Okay," Sirius said.

He turned to grab the other man, planning to take him with them so that Sirius could interrogate him, but he instantly realized that it was too late for that. The man was lying in a pool of his own blood, his eyes wide with panic. The spell Fenrir had cast on him must have been a severing charm because there was a long cut across the man's throat.

"Sirius," Remus groaned slightly.

"Okay," Sirius repeated. "Let's go." He grabbed Remus by the arm and without thinking, apparated them back to Grimmauld.

Remus landed with a scream, gripping his chest like he was trying to hold himself together. In his moment of panic, Sirius had forgotten that apparating someone who was actively bleeding or injured was a bad idea.

The next two hours were filled with Remus's pained breaths, sucked in through gritted teeth, and Sirius's mumbled words trying to calm him. It was a rush to heal him, but he finally managed to repair the damage that Fenrir and the apparating had done. He gave Remus a pain potion and left him to rest in the guest bedroom, escaping the moment he knew Remus was out of the woods.

He sent a quick patronus off to a few members of the Order. They would need to go back for the body and to figure out what Fenrir and the others were there looking for. Something Rabastan had told them about, that was all Sirius knew.

He dropped onto his own bed, hanging his head off the side so his hair was dangling down grazing the floor, and breathed out his first full sigh. It always helped him relieve headaches when he felt them coming on if he hung his head upside down. Remus had clearly wanted him to stay, his eyes pleading and his fingers twitching like he was holding himself back from reaching out, but Sirius couldn't do it though.

What did Fenrir mean about Remus's father? He called him one of his children. Sirius wasn't sure what that meant. He thought about Remus going back to the packs after that confrontation and felt sick. He couldn't let him. He would lock him in his room before he let him put himself in danger like that. Or he would go with him, in animagus form. Remus wouldn't be happy either way, but he couldn't bear for something to happen to him.

He thought of the way Remus would lash out at him if he tried to stop him though and started feeling dizzy again. He could already sense every complicated emotion he had about Remus gripping onto his chest like it would squeeze him to death and without meaning to he summoned a mental version of Lily to help him sort everything out.

It felt like every day now Sirius would have the same conversation (argument) with Lily — thankfully it was just mental, it had been a long while since he'd seen any figments of his imagination haunting his house, and he wasn't hoping to change that anytime soon. He was crazy enough as it was. Regardless, every conversation with the Lily who lived in his head would start the exact same way.

“You just need to talk to him. Just tell him how you feel,” Lily would say. She said it again now, it was a comfort to hear it after such a stressful day.

“I can’t do that,” Sirius replied. A simple denial, but he’d been tumbling through this battle every day for months, and he already knew this conclusion was the only option.

“Why not?” Lily asked. He always imagined her crossing her arms over her chest and tilting her head to the side, the look on her face an obvious sign of his idiocy.

“How could I possibly bring this up to him? I wouldn’t even know where to start.” He always felt hopeless when it came to untangling the wild and ridiculous feelings he had for Remus. It had felt that way since the very beginning, since the first day he met Remus on the train to Hogwarts.

“Start by explaining it to me. What do you feel right now?”

Sirius vaguely wondered when the Lily in his head had become such a therapist. He supposed she was like that when she was alive, but he never would have suspected that he could replicate it.

“I feel angry,” Sirius would always reply first because now that was the first emotion he felt when he opened his eyes every day.

Remus was working with Dumbledore to get you free? And he wasn’t last time? Why did Reggie have to say that to him? He hadn’t thought about it before, not really. If he had, it was all tangled up with the guilt he felt for convincing James and Lily to switch to Peter or for not trusting Remus. He couldn’t see past the brick wall of blame he lived with. That guilt was still there, it was just that anger had started bleeding through the walls.

“Why are you angry?” Lily asked like she didn’t already know.

“Remus left me there to rot. He didn’t try to get me out, he didn’t try to learn the truth, he just believed it.”

“You believed he was a spy too. He wasn’t the only one who believed something that wasn’t true.”

“Exactly.” Sometimes Sirius would snap this word in annoyance, but more often than not, he said it despondently. “How can I tell him that I’m angry when I don’t deserve to be? How can I blame him when I didn’t trust him either?”

“I don’t think you’re being fair to yourself.”

That phrase always made Sirius smile, no matter how upset he was. She used to say that to him when they first became friends. It was after he’d told Snape how to get into the Shrieking Shack and Sirius didn’t think he’d ever have friends again. He was miserable and lonely, and feeling very, very guilty. Lily seemed to latch onto him and more than once, he told her that he didn’t deserve her friendship. She would shrug, smile softly, and say he wasn’t being fair to himself like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Fuck, he missed her.

“You can’t just lay here and not speak to him,” Lily said. She didn’t always say this, but clearly, his subconscious didn’t feel like pulling any punches today.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because then you’re not going to get anywhere, you two are just going to do this for the rest of your lives.”

“Maybe not. He could always move on with Tonks.”

“What are you going to do if he does that?” Lily asked sternly.

Sirius hadn’t thought about it. Okay, that wasn’t strictly true. He’d thought about it quite a bit, he just hadn’t come to any conclusions. He’d probably change the wards, lock both of them out of his house. He’d probably drift into a quiet husk of a person and live out the rest of his days in desolate loneliness. Or maybe he’d move on too eventually. That didn’t seem likely, he’d never felt that kind of attraction for anyone other than Remus.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“So you won’t do anything to get him back and you don’t know what you’ll do if he leaves?”

“I don’t even know that I want him back,” Sirius said. He imagined Lily looking at him like he was stupid again. He wondered if he should be worried by how often a figment of his imagination thought he was an idiot. “I don’t. How can I move on with him when I can barely look at him without feeling angry, betrayed, or guilty? What kind of life could we have together with everything that happened between us?”

“Well, you could start by talking to him,” Lily said.

“I’m not sure I want to hear what he has to say back,” Sirius admitted. He imagined Lily frowning at him, maybe kneeling next to his bed to comfort him. If she was real, she would grab his hand and squeeze it lightly like she used to when he was feeling shitty.

“You can’t live like this forever,” she whispered. Sirius sighed, brushing away the memory of her like it was dust on his clothes.

He did this so often now, and he was getting nowhere. Sometimes he did think about bringing it up to Remus, but that fear was always there. What if Remus was just as mad as Sirius was? What if it all blew up in his face?

Wasn’t it better to have him here in this half-state than not at all? Sure it was torture with Remus heading off to deal with the werewolves and, yes, seeing him with his old man clothes and his facial hair did something to Sirius that was truly unseemly, and it was awful not getting to follow through with those naughty thoughts, but it was better than nothing.

At the same time, what if Sirius didn’t even want him here? What if he was just used to his presence and the moment they started talking, he realized that Remus had to leave? What

would he do then, if he was left all alone to rot?

Sometimes he wished he had died that night in the shack, or when Bellatrix tried to kill him, that way he wouldn't have to deal with all of this. Then Remus would be free too, he wouldn't be chained to a man who didn't know what he was doing or what he wanted. He growled in frustration. Why did he have to still love him? Why couldn't he just not care? Why did seeing Remus suffer still tear at him like a rabid dog?

He was on his way to another spiral when he felt it, it was like a shimmering in the air, but invisible to the naked eye. It washed over him like a waterfall. Someone had just come through the wards. It didn't feel like someone who shouldn't be there, that would have set off alarms for him right away, but there was still something off about it.

He got up from bed and grabbed his wand, walking quickly down to the living room where the floo was. He could hear someone shifting around, it had only been a few moments since they arrived, Sirius had moved quickly, but it was still odd that they hadn't moved out of the room at all. He came careening around the corner, wand drawn and a spell on his tongue.

He didn't know who he expected to see, but it wasn't who was standing there.

Hovering awkwardly in the center of the room was James. Or Sirius thought it was James. He was in an outfit he'd never seen James wear before, an all-blue jumpsuit that covered him from ankle to neck. His hands were curled into fists at his sides and his entire body was tense like he was about to pounce.

"Sirius," he breathed, squinting at Sirius. His hazel eyes weren't covered by their usual glasses. That was weird. In all the times Sirius had hallucinated James, he'd never seen him without his glasses. Or in an outfit he'd never worn while alive.

"Remus," Sirius called over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off of James.

"Yeah?" Remus called back, his tired voice drifting through the walls.

"Can you come here please?" Sirius asked, trying his best to keep his voice even. This had to be fake, some sort of hallucination, but he'd felt someone come through the wards. What if it was a trick? What if they were here to hurt him?

"Sirius," James said again, taking one step toward him. Sirius tensed and jumped back slightly, pointing his wand directly between James's eyes.

"Stop," Sirius said. James frowned and put his hands up.

"What is it, Sirius?" Remus said as he came down the stairs. What if Remus came in and was hurt?

"Don't move," Sirius hissed at James and backed out of the room just enough so that he could speak to Remus. Remus froze when he saw him, the tiredness on his face fleeing into worry.

"What's happening?" he whispered.

“You said you would tell me if something was a hallucination?” Sirius said.

Remus’s expressions seemed to melt quickly from one to another before he settled on understanding. “Where?”

Sirius used his head to indicate the door to the living room. Remus pulled out his wand, though he just held it next to his hip as he led the way into the room. James hadn’t moved except for one hand that was running through his hair like he was stressed as he glanced warily at the fireplace. It was such a quintessential James movement that Sirius was suddenly very sure that this *was* a hallucination. He felt stupid for calling Remus at all and disturbing his rest. He wondered if his constant mental conversations with Lily were hurting him in the long run.

He relaxed slightly, tucking his wand away and rubbing his eyes before looking at Remus who still hadn’t spoken. He hadn’t noticed right away, too self-absorbed to see clearly, but Remus had frozen in place. His eyes were wide and his nostrils were flaring like he was scenting the air. Sirius followed his line of sight to where James was squinting back at them.

There was no possible way , Sirius thought.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Remus spoke, his voice shocked and emotionless all at once.

“James.”

the cell.

Chapter Notes

this is the longest break i've ever taken from this fic, but i'm back (two days early)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first word out of his mouth was Regulus's name.

It took him a while to say it. When he first hit the ground with a startled *oof*, he was too in shock to say much of anything. He wasn't even sure that he remembered how to properly use his jaw and tongue to make noises. He was blindfolded instantly, a soft fabric grazing his skin and pulling taut over his eyes. There were hands on him, and he could feel himself being dragged, but he was too disoriented to understand any more than that.

He hit the ground a second time, this time with a low grunt. The floor was a cold stone that felt rough against his face. He could distantly hear mumbling, two or more people talking to each other, but he couldn't make out the words. It felt like wool had been shoved into his ears. It reminded him of childhood when his mother used to force him to wear ear muffs that were much too large for his little head. He would hate every moment of it, unable to hear anything around him as he would trudge through the icy cold and snow every winter. When he went to Hogwarts, he put his foot down, refusing to take the blasted things with him.

He smiled softly at the memory, the thought of his mother shaking her head in disappointment tugging at his chest like a fishing line might drag a fish to its death. His smile fell just as quickly as it came. Where was his mother now? He felt like he'd just seen her like she'd just had her hands in his, her fingers drifting up to brush his curls out of his eyes as she once did long ago.

The blindfold was removed with a twist of magic. He blinked his eyes open, but it was too bright for him to see anything. He squeezed his eyes shut again when the blinding light started to hurt them. Slowly, as if in a dream, the sensations in his body began to come into focus. He was still lying on the stone floor but clothes covered most of his skin. The cold stone still seeped through, but at least it wasn't as rough as it could have been.

At first, he felt numb, but slowly, everything began to ache. It was like he was being pummeled by bludgers, bruises covering every inch of his body. Where was he? Why was he here? What was going on? The questions began to race as his thoughts caught up to his predicament. He couldn't recall what he was doing right before hitting the floor. What was it? He pressed into his memories, searching for the answer, and discovered the feeling, the obsession...

“Regulus,” he gasped. The word tore through his throat like boiling oil and he coughed painfully, curling in on himself. He cried out in pain once, but making the sound was worse than anything else happening to his body, so he could do nothing except whimper quietly and hope that it would eventually pass.

He couldn’t be sure, given the way his eyes were already shut, but he thought he might have passed out at one point. He was startled into wakefulness by the sound of footsteps, he opened his eyes, shutting them on instinct when he remembered how bright the room was, but when his thoughts caught up to his actions, he realized it wasn’t bright at all.

He opened his eyes again to find the room draped in shadows. He was staring at the rusted legs of an old cot, but it was barely visible in the dark room. He turned on his back slowly, worried that the pain from earlier would drown him, but the pain was gone, replaced by a comfortable ambiance that left him feeling unnerved.

He couldn’t see farther than his feet, everything behind his naked toes was a blur. He reached up and touched his face, finding the place where his glasses usually perched on his nose empty. A slight movement caught his eye, something big was shifting in front of him, but he couldn’t make out what it was. He sat up and dragged himself backward until his back hit the wall and he could go no further.

“Who’s there?” he said to the shadow. The shadow twitched in reply, then started shrinking. It took his brain a moment to catch up and realize that the shadow was likely a person and that that person was likely crouching.

He heard the sound of metal hitting the ground, then sliding across the floor with a sharp shredding sound. Something hit his leg, and he pulled it back into his chest to get away from whatever had careened toward him.

“Breakfast,” a voice said. It echoed in his head, genderless and devoid of life.

He looked down shakily to find a metal plate with some kind of gray mush piled on it. When he looked back up the figure was gone, and James was alone. The tiny space he was in opened up into a wider area, but he couldn’t make out what it was and it was too dark to see much of the details.

He leaned forward slightly and carefully sniffed the odd substance that they gave him. He gagged, shoving the plate away so fast that it tipped over and splattered onto the floor.

“You’re not going to want to do that,” a scratchy voice said. “They only feed us once a day now.”

James jolted in surprise when the man spoke and it took a moment for the words to sink in. “Who are they?”

“Our captors,” the man replied. He sounded hopeless.

James processed that, the word captors searing his thoughts uncomfortably. He was in a cell, that’s what this room was. “How long have you been here?” he asked quietly, not sure if he

actually wanted the answer.

“I don’t know,” the man said just as softly, wistfully. “A long time.... Years.”

“Years?” James yelped.

“A long time,” the man repeated. “I was only forty-three when I was captured.”

“What’s your name?” James asked after a beat, unsure of how else to respond. He didn’t want to ask how old the man was and based on the sound of it, it didn’t seem like he wanted to tell him.

“That hardly matters.”

The answer made James’s unease rise. “Well, I’d like to know what to call you.”

The man sighed. “Just call me Tom.”

James doubted Tom was the man’s real name, but he didn’t bother pushing the subject. He needed to get more important information from him. “Where are we exactly?”

“I don’t know,” Tom said. “A prison.”

“Azkaban?”

“What an odd word.” He spoke like he was only tangentially interested in their conversation. “Could be. I’m not sure that they’ve ever said.”

“Oh,” James replied. “Have there been dementors?”

“Dementors?” Tom asked quizzically. That was a no then, at least, James hoped it was a no.

“Well, my name is James. By the way. Not that you asked,” James rambled. “What else can you tell me about this place?”

“James,” Tom said, his voice thick. “That was my son’s name.”

“Oh,” James said quietly. “Is your son...? What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. He was only a boy when I was captured.”

James swallowed harshly. “I’m sorry.”

Tom made a choked sound and then cleared his throat roughly. “You’ll want to be careful, James. These people, they’re not like you and I. They’re... they’re wizards.”

That gave James pause. “Wizards?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tom whispered. “They can do magic. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true.”

“I see,” James said slowly. “Have they done magic on you?”

Tom made an odd squeaking sound. “Yes, a few times.” James didn’t know how to respond to that. He didn’t know where he was or what was going on. He was afraid. Really and truly afraid. The room was starting to stink with the smell of the gruel, and it felt like it had wriggled its way into his nostrils making him gag every time he breathed in. Was he really going to eat that stuff? He thought he’d rather starve.

He looked at the open space at the end of his cell and without moving he knew that he wouldn’t be able to pass through it. It was a trick. It had to be a trick. He wasn’t going to risk trying yet.

He curled up against the wall, tucking his head into his knees. He was disoriented and struggling to remember what he was doing, leading him to this point. Pushing up against his memories, searching for the most recent, it felt like someone was digging a knife into the bottom of his skull. He had nothing but time though, nothing to do but search.

He started at his earliest memory and began to work down the list of his life, leading him one step closer to how he ended up in Azkaban.

He had made it through his wedding by the time someone came back into the room. The lights were turned on without warning, and though his eyes were closed, he could still see the blinding light against his eyelids. Tom made a grunting sound and James heard a body hit the wall. He thought that maybe Tom had skidded away from the light, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Come with me,” someone said. James blinked up at them. They were the shape of a person, but they were shrouded in darkness as if they were wearing shadows as a cloak. “Now.”

He wanted to fight them, but he needed to know more about what was going on before doing so. He was just relieved that it wasn’t a dementor coming to get him, though he supposed this person wasn’t that far off from one given their appearance. He stood up on shaky legs and carefully stepped around the drying gruel that decorated the floor.

He couldn’t see much beyond general shapes without his glasses, but he could tell that once he left his cell they were in a long corridor. There were no bars, but he could feel the magic warp as he passed the invisible ward that had been placed there to keep him in. He walked to the end of the corridor into a dark office. At least, he thought it was an office. His blurred vision was making his head hurt.

“Ah, perfect. Thank you, you can leave us,” a man said. James squinted toward where the voice came from and could make out a man standing behind a desk. “Please, sit. We have much to discuss.”

James walked forward uncertainly, bumping into a chair before he carefully walked around it and sat down. He heard the man hum under his breath.

“Do you usually wear glasses?”

“Yes,” James said quietly.

“Well, that explains it.” It wasn’t that James thought the man would offer to replace them, but he still found himself surprised that he didn’t. He couldn’t make out the man’s features beyond his fair skin and dark hair. “I apologize that it has taken me so long to introduce myself, but you caused quite a bit of damage coming through and it has taken us a bit to contain it. My name is Unspeakable Kevalin.”

“Unspeakable?” James asked, surprised.

“Yes, I assume you are familiar.”

James couldn’t say that he was, not really, but it did explain the odd disguise that the other person was wearing. Unspeakables were incredibly secretive. He always found their existence fascinating when he was a little kid, even spending a year telling everyone who would listen that he would become one day. He was about seven when he decided it, but he didn’t even have the chance to make it to Hogwarts before his mother squashed that dream.

“Unspeakables are not to be trusted, James. You cannot go into a job like that.” He trusted his mother, dropping the dream like it might burn him. He was disappointed at the time, but like most kids do, he bounced back and forgot the whole thing.

“Am I in the Department of Mysteries?” James asked carefully.

“Of course! Where are my manners? Yes, this is the Department of Mysteries. Two days ago you came through the veil after an unfortunate break-in.”

“The veil?” James asked.

“Yes. Now, I have to ask, do you remember dying?”

“Dying?” James choked on the word. He hadn’t gotten there yet, still pressing against the wall in his memories.

“I’m getting ahead of myself.” Unspeakable Kevalin waved his hands around in front of him, the pale skin looked like a blur of white. “I have some easy questions, then we can get into the tough stuff.” He was obviously grinning as he spoke, and the sound made James’s back muscles tighten with the desire to run.

“Why am I here?” James asked before the man could speak.

“We’ll get there,” Kevalin said. “Now. What is your name?”

“My name?”

“Do you remember it?” Kevalin frowned as he said it. It sounded almost condescending.

“Yes, I remember it,” James said. “Am I a prisoner?”

Kevalin made an unhappy noise. “That’s such a nasty word, don’t you think? Prisoner. It implies you’ve done something wrong. No, you’re not a prisoner.”

“Then why am I still here?”

“You are an anomaly. We study magic here, and we would be remiss to let you walk out the door without learning what we can.”

“So, you are going to let me leave eventually?”

Kevalin made a sound that could have been one of agreement, but James wasn't sure. “Now, what is your name?”

James paused for only a second before answering. “James Potter.”

“Perfect. And how old are you, Mr. Potter?”

“Erm,” James said. “Twenty-one.”

“Great,” Kevalin said cheerfully. “And do you remember how you died?”

James searched his memories. He remembered marrying Lily, their first few months of marriage. He remembered her getting pregnant, the celebrations, the anxieties, all of it. He remembered Harry.

“Is my son alive?” he asked impulsively.

“We really should work down this list first,” Kevalin chided.

“Please, I need to know. He's alive, right?” James begged.

For a moment he thought Kevalin would give in, but then he said, “Let's just work chronologically. We'll get to the present day eventually.”

James slumped back in his seat, blowing out a gust of air in disappointment.

“Do you remember how you died?” Kevalin asked again, sounding much less friendly than he did before.

James kept searching. He remembered his confession to Lily about his complicated feelings about Regulus, his and Lily's quiet agreement that their relationship wouldn't last forever, and finally... right, the night he died. Voldemort appeared inside their wards, knocking on the door like he was a trick-or-treater.

“Yes, I remember how I died.” James waited for Kevalin to reply, but the silence stretched on. Kevalin made a motion with his hand. “I was killed by Voldemort.”

Kevalin jerked slightly. “You say his name? Even after dying by his hand.”

“Hardly matters now, does it? He already bested me.”

Kevalin hummed quietly. “What do you remember from after your death?”

“Nothing,” James said instantly. It was all blank, not just as if it didn’t exist, but as if someone had cracked open his mind and scooped out the memories like they were pumpkin seeds.

“Nothing at all?” Kevalin sounded disappointed.

“No,” James said. “The next thing I remember is hitting the ground.”

Kevalin was silent for a long second. “Well, that is unfortunate, but no worries, I have some ideas of how we can pull those memories out of you. It’ll just be a bit of work.”

James didn’t like the sound of that. “My son?” he asked.

“Let’s work up to it,” Kevalin said. James felt a surge of anger and jumped to his feet. He didn’t even know what his plan was exactly, but he barely had a chance to think before Kevalin was muttering a spell and James’s world went black.

“James,” Tom hissed. The word shook James awake and he instantly tried to sit up, his head spinning. He was on the cot in his cell with no memory of how he got there. “James, are you alive?”

“I’m alive,” James groaned. He rubbed his eyes and the way his arm moved caused his sleeve to shift drawing his attention. He wasn’t in whatever clothes he’d been wearing before, instead, he was in a blue jumpsuit. It was scratchy against his skin, the fabric starched like it had never been worn before.

“What did you try to do? I heard you hit the ground. I thought they had killed you,” Tom said, sounding frantic.

“I tried to attack Kevalin,” James said.

“Whose Kevalin?” Tom whispered.

“He’s an Unspeakable.” He realized only a second later that Tom likely wouldn’t know what that meant and only a second after that that it was odd that Tom hadn’t met Kevalin despite his long history trapped in the Department of Mysteries. “Tom, can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah,” Tom said softly.

“What are they doing to you? What do they use magic on you to do?”

Tom was silent for so long that James thought he might reply. “They’re trying to make me one of them. They don’t bother to explain it very often, but once I overheard them talking, they said they were trying to pull magic out of me. They were very rude. Called me a sea creature and everything.”

“A sea creature?” James asked.

“A squid,” Tom whispered. “They’re madmen. Completely insane.”

A squib, James thought confusedly. It clicked only a second later. A squib. Tom must have come from a magical family but for some reason, Tom wasn't aware of magic, maybe he had been given up for adoption. That was common with some old pureblood families who would hide squibs like they were something to be ashamed of. Even the Potters had a few that weren't talked about often.

So the Unspeakables were trying to get a squib to use magic, some people might even consider that a nice thing to do, but James wasn't fooled. Tom had been here for a long time, he'd been kidnapped and imprisoned for years, all so the Unspeakables could experiment on him.

"I'm sorry," James said.

"It's okay," Tom said. "I appreciate the thought though."

"Have you ever thought about escaping?"

Tom coughed. "Yes, a long time ago. They said — they threatened my boy. They know where he is — my James — and they threatened to hurt him if I tried to get out again."

James's body went cold with fear. "They threatened your son?"

Tom shuffled around before saying, "Yeah. Not that it mattered, there wasn't a way past their magic. There is no way out. I'm sorry you're trapped here, James. I'm sorry." Tom's words faltered out into quiet tears, and James could do nothing except listen helplessly through the wall.

How long would he be trapped here? And Harry, what would happen to Harry if he tried to escape? Would they threaten him? Could they threaten him?

It was two days before someone came to talk to him again. There was one Unspeakable who brought him gruel to eat, but they always seemed to do it when James was asleep. He hadn't eaten any of it yet, the smell still turned his stomach, but he guessed that it was only a matter of time before he got too hungry to resist.

"Come with me," the Unspeakable said. James could make out their wand pointed directly at his chest and he swallowed harshly before climbing to his feet. They hadn't given him shoes or socks, so his feet were cold against the stones. He followed them carefully, feeling a wash of magic settle over him, binding his arms against his sides so he couldn't reach out and touch anything.

He didn't fight though, he didn't do anything. They could do anything to him if they wanted, and if James ever wanted a chance to get out, then he needed as much freedom as possible. Causing problems would just make things worse, it would just restrict him more. He was sure of it.

He followed the Unspeakable up a spiral staircase, tripping slightly on the stairs as his legs shook. He was weak with hunger, his stomach clenching every now and then. They walked

out of another office into a dark round room full of doors. He tried to keep track of which ones they were entering and leaving through, but it was a struggle given their identical appearance.

They entered a long dark hallway that eventually led to a room with a single chair. James was strapped down into it before he could take a breath, incapable of moving even an inch.

“Good afternoon, James,” Kevalin said joyfully, strutting into the room. James noticed the other Unspeakable tinkering with something in the corner of the room but he couldn’t make out what it was. “I told you we had an idea of how to get your memories back from your time among the dead, right? We’re going to start with the easiest and work our way down the list. Sound good?”

James couldn’t move his jaw to reply, not that he had anything to say to the man about to experiment on him.

“Great! Let’s get started. Unspeakable Ajiva, whenever you’re ready.”

The Unspeakable turned toward James, their dark cloak shifting slightly as they did. He watched them fearfully, clenching his teeth as he prepared for whatever they were going to do to him. Unspeakable Ajiva pointed their wand right between James’s eyes and spoke a long phrase in a language that James had never heard before.

A second later, he felt a piercing pain sear through his head, worse than anything he’d ever felt, worse than every broken bone, every heartbreak, every loss, and though he could not open his mouth, he let out a scream so retched, that he swore it could swallow him whole.

Chapter End Notes

i imagine that the cloaks the unspeakables wear are almost vantablack, so they look like the color has been removed completely

the cell part II.

The passage of time did not make sense in the Department of Mysteries. Not to James. There were no windows or clocks, no indicators of what time of day it might be, or any indicator of how much time was passing after he passed out or fell asleep. He thought at first that he would be able to track the days by the meals he was being brought, but then they started to vary that as well and James lost all touch with reality.

He would spend hours staring at the blank wall in his cell, praying for the monotony to end. Sometimes it felt like his brain was beginning to eat itself, consuming every thought and memory like it was the only sustenance it would ever get. He was physically starving too. They barely fed him enough and there was no variety. By the time he was hungry enough to eat the gruel, he found that it had no taste and a horrible glue-like texture that made his mouth feel dry. He forced himself to eat it when they brought it, but it never satisfied him. He could feel his body growing weaker and thinner as time dragged on.

The time spent with the Unspeakables wasn't much better than the time spent in his cell. They kept telling him that they were trying to access his memories from when he was dead, but he didn't know if that was the truth or not. Sometimes it felt like they were just torturing him for fun. Though the only one who actively enjoyed himself was Unspeakable Kevalin, though his joy always seemed robotic, sub-human.

The first round of torture came in the form of painful spells that made him feel like someone was driving a hot nail through his skull. He didn't know what the spells did and he never knew if it was doing anything or not until they brought him back into the room and did it again. He would always be hauled back to his cell, the tops of his feet dragging across the floor uncomfortably.

It would take him hours to recover and he would beg for some kind of respite, but the pain in his head made it impossible for him to sleep. Sometimes he and Tom would speak, but often Tom would leave him to his silence. Other times Tom wouldn't be there at all, undertaking his own brand of torture with the Unspeakables.

After they decided that the spells they were using weren't working, they moved on to potions. They tried a myriad of them. Most made James sick, sometimes causing him to throw up the small amounts of gruel he was able to choke down. Some just made him shiver and grow delirious. They even tried one that glowed like the night sky illuminated by the moon and he was pretty sure they he hallucinated for several days, locked in a vision of the Forbidden Forest full of distant monsters and a danger he could never escape from.

They left him feeling barely human. When Tom asked him how he was doing one day, James couldn't even form words to respond. He started telling James stories about his life before he was taken, but James couldn't retain the information.

After a few potions sessions — which thankfully did not last as long as the original spell sessions did — they began to pull memories out of his head. It was an odd experience

because he could feel the memory floating to the front of his thoughts, forced by magic, of course, but he couldn't really examine it while that was happening. After they pulled the memory out, they would force him to watch them in a pensieve.

This wouldn't have been too bad if it wasn't for the fact that every memory they took was tied to his most painful moments.

"Pain is the anchor of the soul, I'm afraid," Kevalin said. "If there were an easier way, we would use it."

"Liar," James grunted. He was tied to a chair with real ropes this time, but they dug into his skin uncomfortably, even through the blue jumpsuit.

"None of that," Kevalin chided. He always spoke to James like James was a little kid who just needed a firm hand. It made all the torture that much worse given the way his pain was disregarded. It was like he wasn't even a person, just an object for them to play with. His pain didn't matter.

He couldn't tell which memories they took from him in the moment, it wasn't until his head was forced into the pensieve that he would find out. The anticipation was terrible, knowing that whatever he was going to see was going to hurt. They had already done it for one memory that day — it wasn't terrible, a fight he had with Peter and Sirius during his third year at Hogwarts. It was a stupid argument, acerbated by their terrible sleep schedules that year. Luckily it was all over quickly, the argument was resolved over some sandwiches stolen from the kitchen.

He was worried about what the next one would be though. He couldn't ever make out the subtleties of Kevalin's appearance given his poor eyesight, but he tended to make a low grunting noise every now and then whenever he was about to do something truly horrible to James. He wished they would let him go back and rot in his cell.

"Let's get a move on," Kevalin said suddenly.

One time, during the summer, after he graduated Hogwarts, Lily forced him to watch a muggle film called "*The Great Gatsby*" and James spent the next four weeks imitating the ridiculous way people in the movie spoke as if they thought people from the 1920s were all caricatures. Sometimes Kevalin sounded like that to him.

He dismissed the memories of Lily's blatant annoyance at James's imitations just as the floating pensieve came up to his face. His head was forced down with magic and he was sucked up into the memory in an instant, his body falling through the cloudy space into a specific place and time of his past.

The moment his feet landed in the memory, he ached to escape. He wished there was a way to force himself out of it, but he'd never learned how and he was sure they would just force him right back.

This memory was of the night Regulus died.

He had just come back from visiting his parents, spending the afternoon pretending that everything was normal and that he wasn't under the constant strain of looming war. He came through the floo to find Sirius curled up on the floor next to Lily, half hidden behind their old couch. Sirius's face was red and streaked with tears, his eyes puffy. He was holding onto his knees, his nails obviously digging in painfully as if he could hold in his pain by sheer force of will.

"What's wrong?" James asked. The other James, the past James — the present James just stood off to the side watching helplessly.

"James." Sirius's voice cracked painfully like his throat was torn up from sobbing. "It's Regulus."

James could still remember the sinking feeling, the way his stomach spun traitorously. He thought he might be sick or that he might pass out or simply die where he stood. And yet he could not express any of it.

No one knew, even after years, that he and Regulus had been together, that James had loved him, that he would have lived and died for him if Regulus had let him, if Regulus hadn't turned his back on their relationship by taking the Dark Mark, making the one choice that James couldn't abide.

But Regulus was dead. He was *dead*. Did the Dark Mark matter so much now? Did it matter that he had that stupid brand? James would have gone back in an instant, he would have forgiven him without Regulus even having to ask if it meant he would have survived.

"How do you know?"

"They held a funeral for him," Sirius said. He didn't need to elaborate. James understood that if the family held a funeral, then Sirius wouldn't have been invited, and if he wasn't invited, then they wouldn't have bothered to tell him how Regulus died.

It was painful watching his past self try to control his facial expressions. Sirius was too broken to see it, too swallowed up with self-hatred, rage, betrayal, and grief to see anything at all. Lily, however, could see it all perfectly. He had the benefit of hindsight now, and the ability to watch her face this time. She was giving him a curious look, a look he now knew would lead to her discovering his secret.

Despite the pain he felt in that moment, he remembered being grateful that someone finally knew. He never quite recovered from the grief of keeping a secret from Sirius, especially a secret like that. Sometimes he thought about telling him, but then everything just went to shit and he ran out of time. After Regulus's death, it felt like it would be too cruel to tell Sirius about the way James knew his brother. He would often wonder if Sirius would blame him for Regulus's death if he knew that they were involved. He always told himself that it was better if Sirius didn't know. Or perhaps, at the end of the day, James was just a coward.

"Hmm, Regulus Black. Sirius's brother?" Kevalin said thoughtfully. James had to work not to jump, somehow he always forgot that Kevalin followed him into the pensieve. It made his

stomach twist thinking of an Unspeakable seeing all of his worst memories. “His death was traumatic for you.” It wasn’t a question.

They were sucked out of the memory a second later, James gasping as his head was ripped up. Surprisingly, they hadn’t pulled any of his memories of Regulus yet. Most of them were about his friends, one or two about Lily and the final night of his life, and once they pulled the memory of his parents dying, yet Regulus was left untouched. Of course, that would all change now.

“Grab everything we have on Regulus Black,” Kevalin said to one of the other Unspeakables in the room. James didn’t know their name.

“Which one?”

Kevalin made an odd noise, before saying, “The second one.” The Unspeakable swept out of the room. “Now, Mr. Potter, what was your relationship to Regulus Black?”

James looked away from him, his thoughts an echo of *not this, not this, not this*. He would rather talk about any other topic than his failed relationship with Regulus. He would relive his death a hundred times before willingly telling Kevalin a single private detail about Regulus. *His* Regulus. The one only he knew.

“No matter,” Kevalin said. He sounded like he was smiling. “I think I can figure it out.” James squeezed his eyes closed, a rush of shame drenching him as he tried to imagine what Kevalin was thinking.

He was taken back to his cell a moment later, and he could only be glad that he didn’t have to spend any more time that day reliving his worst moments. He called out to Tom, but there wasn’t a response. He must be with Unspeakables then. They often took them at the same time. James laid back on his cot and closed his eyes.

Sometimes, when he was alone, he would play out his best memories just as a way to touch a little freedom, but most of the time, he just thought about escaping. He would run through everything he knew about the Department of Mysteries, the Unspeakables, and the magic holding him in place. He had to find a way out. Harry was out there and James needed to get to him.

He thought that he might have been there for about a month by the time he finally encountered another prisoner. Tom was speaking to him less and less as time went on, and James was just beginning to grow to the ends of his insanity when four Unspeakables came in and dropped someone into a cell a few down from James’s. He couldn’t see them from where his cell was, but he could hear them groaning and moving around as the Unspeakables left.

“Welcome back, Catalina,” Tom said grimly. “I’m sorry to see that you’re still alive.”

James gasped, but the person made an odd choking noise before laughing. It was a woman’s laugh, high-pitched and flighty. It reminded James a bit of his mother’s laugh.

“No one is more disappointed than I am,” she said. It was clear from her voice that she was older, she had that gruff aspect to her voice like she’d been smoking for twenty years. She spoke with a strong Eastern European accent. “Who else is here?”

James froze, though he wasn’t sure why. He felt caught.

“That’s James,” Tom said evenly, conversationally.

Catalina was quiet for a beat. “Your boy?” she asked softly.

“No, no,” Tom said quickly, although James wasn’t sure how he actually knew. If he had been separated from his son for as long as he thought, then there wasn’t any way for Tom to know what he sounded like and it wasn’t like they ever talked about their personal lives. Tom seemed keen to avoid the topic and James wasn’t going to push him.

“Well, James. Who are you then?” Catalina said when no one else spoke.

“That’s a loaded question I think,” he said.

Catalina laughed. “Is it always?” she said. He thought she might mean *isn’t it always* but her accent omitted the extra syllable. “How did they catch you?”

James smiled slightly, the way she said it like it was that simple, that it could happen to anyone, made him feel oddly comforted. There was an obvious kinship between Tom and Catalina, and he could understand why. He supposed it could happen to anyone if Tom was here. He decided to opt for the truth since she asked.

“I was dead,” he said. “I think I actually broke in through the afterlife.” He wondered what Tom would have to say to that, but he was silent.

“Yeah,” Catalina said thoughtfully. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?” James asked.

She made an over-exaggerated sniffing noise. “The smell.”

James didn’t know how to reply to that, so he changed the subject. “What about you?”

“Ah, they caught me running free one night. Knew it was a mistake to run without a pack.”

“A pack?” he asked.

“S’right,” she slurred. “Miss my pack.” In the next breath, she was snoring. She must have been a werewolf, James assumed. Who else would be talking about running with a pack?

“How long has she been here?” James asked softly.

“Not long,” Tom replied instantly.

He wanted to ask about what Tom meant, by her still being alive, but given his own treatment by the Unspeakables, he figured he didn't need the details. He wondered what she would be like when she woke up, but the next time James came back from his session with Kevalin, Catalina was gone again.

He was ashamed to admit it, but he didn't think about her again until much later when it was far too late for him to do anything for her at all.

"This whole memory business isn't making much headway," Kevalin said, obviously frowning. They had watched the memory of James breaking up with Regulus during their last session, and based on the way Kevalin was watching him during it, James guessed that was their final card and that they had nothing left to play.

"Why not let me go then if I cannot help you?" James said though he guessed there wasn't a chance of that yet. There was still a small part of him that hoped that they would free him, that they would get what they wanted or admit that they never would, and they would let him go. He couldn't help the hope that still lived inside him.

"Oh, don't be so hard on yourself, James. You can still be helpful."

James growled, throwing his head back in frustration. "I'm never going to remember anything! You can't just keep me here forever."

"Don't worry, there is another plan. Now, Unspeakable Ajiva is going to run this next portion. It is an unusual approach, but we may as well try."

"What are you going to do to me now?" James asked despondently.

"You will see," Kevalin said. James was forcibly lifted. He wished they would give him shoes to wear, his feet were always getting cut up on the stone floors of the department. They dragged him through the circular room, into a door that sat diagonally across from where they left. James tried to keep track of it, as he always did, but he struggled to do so. Kevalin wasn't with them, he noticed. He must have stayed back in his office.

The moment they walked through the next doorway, James nearly collapsed to his knees. He probably would have if they hadn't been holding him up. He choked and gasped frantically but it felt like something was sucking the air from his lungs. He couldn't see anything, just black rubble and a broad, dark space in front of him.

"How long do you expect this to go on?" another Unspeakable said. There were three of them standing near where James was. They sounded unaffected by whatever was attacking him.

"He does seem to be very affected, doesn't he?" Suddenly, the Unspeakable holding him up dropped him, and James fell flat on the floor. Though his body didn't move, he could feel something tugging at his skin like if it was stronger it would drag him across the rubble-covered floor.

"How will we know if any of his memories return?" an Unspeakable said.

“We won’t. We are only hoping that he is not killed.”

There was a silence, the only noise the sound of James’s hopeless gasping. He clawed at his throat, his nails scratching his skin. He tried to ask for help, to beg for mercy, but no noise came out of him.

“What’s wrong?”

James thought they were speaking to him at first before Ajiva responded.

“Kevalin is a fool,” he snarled. It was the most emotion James had ever heard an Unspeakable use.

“You believe he made an error?” The other Unspeakable sounded clinical.

“Those kids were not here for this one.” *They’re talking about me*, James thought stupidly. “We should have kept the other one.”

James made one more coughing noise as his vision began to dim, as he slowly lost consciousness, he just heard, *the other one, the other one, the other one...*

He woke sputtering when someone dropped a bucket of cold water on his face. He coughed and choked, blinking harshly as he tried to clear the water from his eyes.

“There he is,” Kevalin said joyfully, snapping his fingers twice like it was a nervous tic. “Good as new.”

“What happened?” James croaked.

“You just had a bit of a fall,” Kevalin said. James blinked at him, then blinked again. They were back in Kevalin’s office, but he was sitting half on the desk, his leg tucked up like he was planning to climb up onto it. There was something odd about his face, but as always, James couldn’t see what it was, not clearly.

“Where is Ajiva?”

“Ah, well, Ajiva will no longer be working on this project.”

“What?” James breathed.

“He had a change of heart and he’s been removed.”

“You fired him?” James asked. His head hurt, and he wanted so badly to be thrown back into his cell so that he could get some sleep.

“No, not fired!” Kevalin said loudly with a laugh. “Just reassigned. No one ever leaves the Department of Mysteries.”

James knew he meant the Unspeakables, the employees, but he couldn't help the way his stomach dropped. *No one ever leaves the Department of Mysteries.* "It's like Azkaban."

"Right, you are. No one ever escapes Azkaban," Kevalin agreed, he clicked his heel against his desk.

James didn't miss the change from *leaves* to *escapes*. "Sirius did," he mumbled tiredly.

"What's that, Mr. Potter?" Kevalin asked, keen interest in his voice.

"Sirius escaped Azkaban," James said. His eyes slid shut without his approval. It was dead silent in the office and for a moment he wondered if he'd fallen asleep, but when he opened his eyes it was to find Kevalin frozen as if he'd been hexed.

"How do you know that?" he asked carefully.

"Know what?" James asked, tilting his head. It felt too heavy on his neck and it fell against his shoulder.

"Sirius Black did not escape Azkaban until after you were killed. How do you know that?"

James stared at him for a long moment, the blurred features making him look more menacing than he might have otherwise. "I don't know."

Kevalin made a frustrated noise but jumped off the desk. He left the office without a word, clanking up the spiral staircase loudly. James tipped his head back again and slipped into sleep without meaning to. The last thing he thought of was Regulus wearing dress robes, his hair long and silky, tucked behind his ears.

the cell part III.

James didn't remember the statement about *the other one* right away. Once he passed out in Kevalin's office, he thought of little else for a long time. He could tell that he'd been asleep for far too long when he opened his eyes, but he felt oddly rested and content, at least for a few moments before he remembered where he was.

He groaned as he sat up, his chest and throat hurt, but otherwise, he was unharmed. There was a plate of gruel near where his cell ended, and by the looks of it, it had been sitting there for a while. He scrunched up his nose in disgust just as his stomach began to growl. He was weighing his options, whether eating it was worth it or not, when the lights turned on and Kevalin walked in.

He was strutting cockily, clapping his hands together periodically as he went. He had a habit of always making some kind of noise with his hands — whether it was with clapping, snapping, or slapping his hands against random parts of his body.

“You're awake, perfect. Follow me.” Kevalin spun around on one foot after peering at James, he lifted the other one halfway up off the ground.

James climbed to his feet carefully. His skin ached. They never gave him a place to bathe, and though they had clearly added charms to the jumpsuit to keep him clean, he always felt that cleaning charms could only do so much. They rubbed him raw. His bare feet slapped against the stones as he walked, seeming oddly loud in the quiet space. He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

He followed Kevalin up the spiral stairs to the identical office that existed above, watching dispassionately as the desk reformed together so that they could take a seat at it. It seemed like a needlessly complicated entrance.

“Tell me, Mr. Potter, do you remember what you said to me last time we spoke?” James looked away from the desk, he had been searching for where the wood split. It was impossible to see normally.

“No,” James said instantly, not even bothering to think about it. He'd been exhausted and delirious, plus it hardly mattered what he said even if he did remember it. Kevalin was bound to tell him.

He could practically sense Kevalin frowning as if the muscles in his face pulling his lips down affected the very vibrations in the air. Kevalin humphed unhappily. “Are you certain? Perhaps I can jog your memory. You mentioned Sirius Black.”

James squinted at him, as if he was deep in thought, though in reality, his thoughts were blank. He didn't really care about what Kevalin was after. It didn't matter either way.

Kevalin made a low growling noise. “You said that Sirius Black escaped Azkaban, and he did! But after you died and before you came back. That means you remember something.”

“Okay,” James said slowly. When he thought about it, he was sure that he knew that Sirius escaped Azkaban, but he didn’t know how he knew or why Sirius was in prison to begin with. That information should have been distressing, but for some reason, he felt oddly neutral about it. Perhaps a bit sad, but overall, unbothered. “Is Sirius okay?”

Kevalin quirked his head to the side slightly. “You don’t know?”

“No,” James replied.

Kevalin hummed. “I have another idea, but I need a starting place.” He raised his wand quickly, and James didn’t even have time to flinch before Kevalin muttered, “*Legilimens*.”

The start of this grand idea turned out to be the most intrusive one yet. There wasn’t pain like there was with the other tests. Nothing more than a small pinch as Kevalin invaded his thoughts, but beyond that, it was relatively painless. However, the way his mind was opened up and riffled through made him feel like someone had cracked open his ribs.

He felt violated. He was forced to watch as Kevalin looked at all his memories, anything he might want to hide or keep just to himself. He was practically begging the man to stop by the time he pulled out of James’ head. He could feel tears on his cheeks from when he’d shed them, his hands grasping the armrests to keep from shaking.

Kevalin did not acknowledge him, he just looked down at a piece of parchment on his desk and began scrawling across it viciously. James closed his eyes, disinterested, and let the scratching noises of Kevalin’s quill lull him into a meditative state.

James so desperately wanted to run, he wanted to leave this office and never come back. Looking at Kevalin made him feel sick to his stomach. He wondered if he could manage to escape if he tried at that moment. Kevalin was distracted, he was nearly consumed by his work and James was pretty fast, he could get up and run.

But Kevalin had his wand and could always hit him in the back with a spell before James could make it out the door. James needed to figure out a way to get his wand from him. He could jump over the desk or run around it, but all of those options seemed too slow. He double-checked that he wasn’t tied to the chair, but Kevalin was always a little too lax. It was as if he thought James wouldn’t ever try it.

He sighed, deciding not to do anything yet. He needed a clearer shot, he just needed to bide his time a little longer. Plus there was Tom to think about. It wasn’t like James could just leave him here, not when he’d spent so long trapped. Especially not when James knew that he had a son out there. He wouldn’t leave him.

“So, what is your new plan?” James asked though he knew the answer would likely be terrible. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but at the same time, having some foreknowledge would probably be helpful.

“I believe this one will work,” Kevalin said.

James waited for him to continue speaking and when he didn't, he said, "And that plan is?"

"Let's start from the moment you died," Kevalin mumbled distractedly. "Then we will visit the Death Chamber again."

"The Death Chamber?" James said alarmedly.

"Yes. Now, you died on the 31st of October, 1981. Killed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. This we already discussed. Do you know what followed?"

James swallowed roughly. "No."

"He killed your wife." Kevalin began flipping through a couple of pages on his desk. "A... Lily Potter."

Something about the fact that Kevalin didn't even know Lily's name made James angry. He couldn't even bother to learn it before talking to him?

"Yes, Lily Potter was murdered as well. Then He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named attempted to kill your son, Harry Potter, and was destroyed in return."

James felt his chest clench, some unnamed emotion sweeping through him so quickly that he wasn't able to examine it. He didn't think it was a normal one to have when someone discovered that Voldemort tried and failed to kill their son.

After that, Kevalin went into the events that followed Voldemort's destruction. Sirius was arrested and thrown into Azkaban for selling them out to Voldemort and murdering twelve muggles. This made James feel sad, and betrayed, but he did not worry for Sirius. He already knew that Sirius made it out. He knew that he was innocent. The oddest thing was the fact that Kevalin clearly did not share this belief.

"Someone that powerful, well it benefits everyone if he doesn't face any more punishment. I won't jump ahead too much, but the papers say he's innocent now. But he's Sirius Black. No one from that family is innocent."

James bit down on his response, the desire to scream that Sirius wasn't like his family. People were always making assumptions about Sirius, they always wanted to act like they knew him just because of the way he looked or the people he was related to. Sirius always brushed off their judgments in public, but he had spent enough time with Sirius to know how upset those assumptions made him.

They made it all the way through 1983 before Kevalin decided to take a break. "Oh, excellent. Right on time," Kevalin said. James turned in his chair to see two Unspeakables enter the room. "You can go ahead and take him."

James was unceremoniously dragged out of his chair and back to what he assumed was the Death Chamber, the room full of rubble and shadows. He suffered through the suffocation again, the clawing feeling at his skin and his throat. The Unspeakables watched him silently, as if they were unaffected by his torment, until he finally, blissfully, lost consciousness.

After that, each time he woke up, he was taken through the same steps. A long meeting with Kevalin where he would talk on and on about whatever he decided was an important event for that year, followed by a session in the Death Chamber. No memories resurfaced. Each time Kevalin invaded his mind, he felt sick and powerless, but it all came to nothing. It was just torture, only torture.

It took a bit for him to finally remember what the Unspeakables had said his first time in the Death Chamber. The statement about *the other one* . It was Tom that finally reminded him.

“They keep bringing you back unconscious,” Tom said grimly one day. “I keep expecting you not to wake up.”

“Me too,” James said. He had to clear his throat twice before he could say anymore, his body hurt constantly now. He felt like he was always in pain, it was a struggle to move, to swallow, to breathe.

“Why are they doing this to you?”

“They want to know what I remember from being dead, guess they think they’ll find some great knowledge there. I don’t remember anything though.”

“I guess you are the only person who came back from the dead,” Tom said, chuckling slightly.

“Suppose so,” James said, frowning. “Though I doubt they’d let me go even if I wasn’t the only one to do it.”

“You’re probably right, especially if no one knew that you were alive to begin with. How did you come back? Does it have to do with the magic they have?”

James opened his mouth to reply but paused. How had he come back? They hadn’t bothered to explain it to him, probably figuring that he didn’t need to know. They didn’t seem interested in educating him along with themselves. However, the Unspeakables said that *those kids* weren’t there for him. Who were they and who did they come for? Was he brought back by accident? That’s when he remembered. *We should have kept the other one* .

“I don’t think I came back alone,” James whispered.

“What do you mean?” Tom asked.

“I think there was someone else.”

“You think there was someone else with you?”

“Yes,” James said, more confidentially. “Yes, I think there was someone else!” Goosebumps spread across his skin when he said it. *There was someone else*. Why didn’t he realize it before? There was this reluctance from the Unspeakables as they worked with him — beyond

Kevalin who was his own brand of chipper and awful — and this confusion like they didn't understand why he was there.

They mentioned the kids coming to get someone, but who were they coming to get? Who would come through with him? Or maybe... who would drag him through? And why?

Kevalin came to get him a few hours later. Tom was already gone, taken by three Unspeakables who crowded around him like he was a dangerous animal who might attack at any moment. Their black-as-night robes blocked his view of Tom, and James couldn't help thinking about how weird it was that he still hadn't seen what the man looked like.

Kevalin came for James alone. He sounded chipper as usual. Despite their lack of progress, Kevalin seemed more than happy to continue the research, not discouraged at all. James was discouraged though. He was bone tired and it felt like every motion would break him apart.

"I have a question," James said when they settled down across from one another.

"Of course! I will answer your questions, Mr. Potter." James knew that was a lie.

"How did I come through the veil? Was someone tampering with it? Did I come through alone?"

Kevalin gave a strained laugh. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that."

"I'm not—" He cut off with a growl. "I'm not worried about it, but I think I deserve to know. I'm the only one here, but there was someone else, wasn't there?"

Kevalin gave him a long look, and though James couldn't see him very clearly, he could almost feel the sharp frown that Kevalin wore across his face. "I believe it was Sirius Black's son."

James raised his eyebrows. They hadn't gotten that far in the timeline, only till 1991, and it was mostly big world events after he finished talking about the moments directly following James's death. But Sirius's son? That had never been mentioned.

"His son?" James breathed.

"I believe he was close in age to Harry Potter. They were in the same year before he died."

"Sirius Black had a son and then he died?" James asked stupidly. "That's impossible."

"Why is that?" Kevalin asked.

Because Sirius Black is gay was on the tip of his tongue, but he managed to hold it in. Sirius probably wouldn't appreciate being outed to a random Unspeakable, especially one that already had such a low opinion of him.

"It's just not possible," James said when he realized he'd been silent for too long.

"I assure you, he had a son. I've seen him. He was involved in the Triwizard Tournament."

“The what?” James yelped.

Kevalin waved a hand around, dismissing the question. “We will get there. Now, where were we?”

“Tom,” James hissed. “Tom, are you there?”

There was no response, just icy silence. He must have been with the Unspeakables again, James thought, as he huffed against the cot. He’d only been awake for a few minutes, having passed out from another visit to the Death Chamber, but he needed to tell Tom what he learned.

He knew for a fact that Sirius Black never had a son, he couldn’t even imagine him sleeping with a woman, let alone anyone other than Remus. And if this son was the same age as Harry then it would have had to happen before James and Lily died. Sirius and Remus were fighting a lot around that time, but not enough for Sirius to cheat on him. That just didn’t make sense.

So then who was the person claiming to be his son? And how had he died? Did Sirius know about him? He had to get out and ask him. If Sirius was alive and exonerated, then he could help James. He probably would already be helping James if he knew that James was alive. James just had to get to him. But how?

He planned to ask Tom how he’d tried to escape in the past, at least in hopes that he could narrow down his options, but for now, he was alone. He slipped back into a restless sleep.

When he woke, it was to find an Unspeakable standing at the entrance to his cell. He jolted in surprise, blinking to clear the sleep from his eyes.

“Hello?” he said. The Unspeakable turned away from him, drifting down the corridor and out of sight. A moment later, James could hear an odd noise, like talking that was blocked by a half-formed silencing charm. He wondered if they added that to Tom’s cell whenever Kevalin came to talk to James given the fact that Tom didn’t know who Kevalin was.

In all honesty, it was odd that Kevalin was willing to show his face at all. All the other Unspeakables were so careful like they didn’t want him to know who they were or didn’t want each other to know. Why was Kevalin different? And why was he different with James specifically?

“We’ll have to — No, I don’t think so.” A voice was coming through the silencing charm. What kind of idiot couldn’t cast a proper silencing charm? That was just ridiculous. These were the people researching him?

“Another — Doesn’t make — At least ten — With Tom gone —”

The words faded to silence abruptly like someone had just slammed a door shut. It didn’t matter though, James had heard that last part. *With Tom gone*. Where was Tom? He waited for a few minutes and when the silence continued, he called out, “Tom.”

There was nothing, no response. He could have been wrong, but he didn't think so. Somewhere deep inside him, he knew.

Tom was dead. They had killed Tom. Oh, Merlin. He had to get out of here. Sirius and Remus were alive. His son... Harry was alive. He had to get to them and he had no other options. He would get out or he would die trying because no one was coming for him. No one knew he was alive and there was no one to check up on the Department of Mysteries. The Ministry didn't care what they did.

The final plan for his escape started slowly, in the long nights of silence and darkness. He wondered if this was how Sirius felt when he escaped from Azkaban. There were only three Unspeakables who came to see James, the two who never removed their disguises, and Unspeakable Kevalin. He doubted he would ever be able to get away from the two in disguise, they never even bothered to pull out their wands when they were around him, but Kevalin was arrogant. He was too confident that James would never try anything.

James bided his time, he could tell the days were passing by how many meals he was getting, but he couldn't get this wrong. He figured that he had one chance and that chance could only happen when he was with Kevalin alone.

"Rise and shine, Mr. Potter," one of the Unspeakables said. James sighed and sat up. He barely slept nowadays, the cot he was on was terribly uncomfortable and he hated laying on it. He would sometimes fall into fitful rest, but it was never enough. "Stand."

James stood. His feet always felt like they were being pierced by needles when he touched the cold floor for the first time. He was disappointed, if the Unspeakable was making him stand then he was being taken somewhere, and seeing as it wasn't Kevalin, that meant it would be that much harder, if not impossible, for him to escape. He never knew when they would take things too far with their experiments, he never knew when it would be the last time he left his cell. However, that day was the first time he'd been truly concerned by that prospect.

He walked forward, sizing up the person as best he could through their bizarre disguise. Maybe there was a chance, if he could just be a little faster, or if they pulled out their wand.

"Oh, you've already got him up. Good, good," Kevalin said suddenly, coming into the hallway. "I'll take it from here."

"Of course," the Unspeakable responded, disappearing down the hallway that James knew led to Kevalin's office.

"Feeling good today, James? I hope so because we have quite the idea." Kevalin sounded cheerful and that never boded well for James. "Come along." He gestured for James to go ahead of him.

They went up to the second office again and the Unspeakable thankfully left them immediately. James walked to the chair, sitting down right on the edge of it so that he could stand quickly if needed. He leaned back though, trying to appear like he was fully relaxed

and not filled with anxious energy. He could already feel his heart pounding loudly in his chest. It felt like it would leap out at any second and start galloping around the room wildly.

Kevalin sounded off — as if something was frustrating him — and James wondered if it had to do with Tom. Something had happened to him, they must have done something that led to his death. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck, if Kevalin was frustrated then maybe that meant he was also distracted, or at least could easily be distracted.

If there was one thing that James had learned during his time with the Unspeakables, it was that Kevalin loved to lecture about his work. James only had to ask a simple question and Kevalin would talk non-stop for an hour about the topic, no matter how boring. As long as James didn't ask questions specifically about his own treatment and what they planned to do with him, Kevalin was more than happy to share.

He knew he needed to distract him today, to push him over the edge that Kevalin was standing on with his emotions already running high.

“Why do you have two identical offices?” James asked curiously. He didn't want to have small talk with this monster, but he figured going for a casual question would arouse the least suspicion.

“The one below is the real office, where I prefer to work. This one is just meant to observe the Full Moon Chamber. Sometimes it's good to shake up the monotony though, don't you think?”

“Yes,” James agreed simply. “What's the Full Moon Chamber?”

Kevalin's head twitched. “Oh, now this one is truly spectacular!”

Perfect, James thought as Kevalin rose from his seat and walked to the wall of the circular office. James stood slowly, staying a few paces away from the man, and watched as Kevalin pulled out his wand and cast a quick and silent spell.

James gasped as the walls vanished in an instant. They were still in the office, but now it was surrounded by a deep, dark forest. It almost looked like the Forbidden Forest, but the parts of it that even Moony wouldn't dare enter. There were parts of that forest full of huge Acromantulas and old, haunted ruins of ancient wizards. Once they even found a bizarre entrance to a bygone cave blocked with stones set in a huge circular feature. Moony had sniffed it only once before turning tail and running.

That's how this forest felt. It was as if there was something deeply wrong with it, as if it was haunted, whether by real ghosts and monsters or by memories James didn't know. The dark trees were a mesh of green, brown, and black, and he couldn't make out much, but he did catch a lightning-fast movement from deep within the forest.

“What was that?”

Kevalin laughed happily, clapping his hands together. “Well, it's a werewolf, of course. What else would we use a Full Moon Chamber for?”

Catalina , James thought. Surprisingly, for the first time, he wondered if he could still turn into a stag. He sighed silently. There was nothing for it, there was no way he could help Catalina and also escape. If he kept biding his time, they would eventually kill him. He had to make his move now and hope that he could come back for her.

Kevalin, meanwhile, was still chattering away. “Did you know that muggles flew tiny metal boxes to the moon? Fascinating creatures muggles.”

James hated the way he said the word muggles like they were flobberworms he was about to cut up and throw in a potion.

“We’re getting close to replicating what they did, I believe. Just need one more muggle to help us,” he muttered the last part to himself. “It’s fascinating, isn’t it? The thought of going to the moon. Especially with a werewolf. Would they stay in werewolf form or would they change back and forth in an infinite cycle? Would they not change at all? It’s fascinating.”

While he spoke, James began to take very slow steps toward Kevalin, who had his back to him and seemed too enthralled with what he was saying to notice James moving. James knew he would only have one chance to get away and he had to do it right.

“Right now we’re just seeing how long a werewolf can safely stay in werewolf form. We’ll get a new one for the moon trip, of course.”

James took his last step, and using all the strength he had left in his body, he hit Kevalin sharply in the back of the neck. His knuckles cracked against his spine, making a sharp noise as Kevalin’s head was thrown back and his body was shoved forward. James jumped on top of him instantly, wrestling him to the ground. Kevalin was making awful, choking sounds as he went.

He could see that Kevalin was fumbling with the wand in his pocket, but it was at an awkward angle so it slowed him down just enough for James to pluck it from his fingers, dragging it roughly away. Kevalin shouted and James, without thinking, shot a silencing spell at him. Kevalin’s mouth opened and closed like fish and James, for the time, managed to get a good look at him.

He had always thought there was something wrong with Kevalin, though whether that was because of his actions or what he looked like, James hadn’t been sure. Not until now. He was now close enough to see the details of his skin. It was multicolored, some patches grayer than others. There was a long stitch down the center of his face starting at his hairline and ending at the tip of his nose. It was almost invisible from far away, but up close James could see the black thread.

There was something very inhuman about him and under different circumstances, James would have felt fear. However, all he could feel at that moment was the adrenaline pumping in his veins.

Kevalin lunged at him and James shifted back, kicking Kevalin in the chest as went. There wasn’t time to examine the way Kevalin looked. He needed to get out, especially if the other

Unspeakables had heard Kevalin's shout. "*Stupify*," he whispered, hitting Kevalin right in the center of his chest.

He ran to the door, swinging it open and brandishing the wand, preparing to fight whoever was there. However, the circular room full of doors was empty. He looked around carefully, based on the Full Moon Chamber that Kevalin just showed him, the doors on either side of the one he left through both led there.

He knew the Death Chamber and the other experiment rooms were generally across from him and to his right, so he took a wild guess and opened the door two to the left of the one he'd exited through. It was locked at first, but a quick wave of the wand opened it without any trouble as if it was keyed to Kevalin's magic and had mistaken James for him.

James could have cried when he opened the door and saw the long corridor waiting for him. He didn't know the Ministry well, having only been a few times when he was training to become an Auror before he had to go into hiding, but he knew it well enough to know what the walls, floors, and light fixtures looked like.

He heard a door open behind him, and without bothering to look back, he took off, slamming the door as he went. He raced down the hallway as fast as he could. His bare feet were damaged and his skin felt like it was coming apart under the blue jumpsuit as it grated against him, but he ignored it to the best of his ability, letting his pounding heart drive him.

He was just skidding around a corner when a spell went flying right next to his ear. He ducked on instinct and chanced a quick look back to see an Unspeakable running after him, Kevalin right at his heels. He redoubled his speed. He took two more turns at random before spotting the blurry door of the lift in the distance. It wasn't far, but if the lift took too long, he wouldn't make it.

He slammed into the wall, running too fast to properly stop himself, and pressed the button for the lift with the knuckle of his pointer finger. He turned as he waited for the door to open and began throwing spells indiscriminately at the Unspeakable and Kevalin as they rushed toward him. The Unspeakable was throwing up shields faster than James could track them, but James was just trying to keep him busy enough so that he wouldn't be able to throw anything back.

He heard the lift door open behind him and he backed into the lift without looking. He reached over to press any button just to get the door to close. In his moment of distraction, the Unspeakable managed to disarm him. The wand went flying from his hand right as the door shut, leaving him unarmed as the lift began to move.

He looked around quickly, relieved to discover that he was alone. He leaned forward and squinted to read the buttons, pressing the one for the atrium. He stepped back from the door as he waited, the lift flying up and to the side as it traveled. He had no way of knowing what time it was or what day, but he was just glad that there didn't seem to be many people moving around in the Ministry.

The atrium was similarly empty, a few people were milling around, but not many. If James had to guess, he would think it was probably the middle of the workday and that most people

were in their offices. He walked carefully, trying not to rush out of the lifts and into the atrium. He couldn't tell if he was drawing attention or not, the faces of the other Ministry employees too blurry for him to make out.

He walked past them slowly, hoping his bare feet didn't give him away. He was just passing by the guard when the lifts opened behind him and he heard Kevalin yell, "Mr. Potter! Stop what you're doing right now." He said it in a sing-song voice that made James feel like he was Prongs running from a predator.

James took off without thinking. He zagged to the side just in time for another spell to barely miss him. He was almost there, almost cleared from the Ministry if he could just make it to the floo. He could get out and to safety.

It felt like everything was moving slowly or too quickly all at once. Kevalin was throwing spells and the guard had joined him. James could hear them not far behind and everything was so blurry. He was so close though, close enough that when the next spell flew through his hair, he leaped forward and dove head-first into the fireplace.

He was infinitely grateful that the Ministry floos didn't require floo powder. He hadn't thought about where to go, all he could think about was his friends and his son. He said quietly right as he felt the green flames erupt, "Sirius Black's house," and spiraled away leaving Kevalin in the dust.

the return.

Everyone took Regulus no longer being dead much better than he would have expected. Perhaps it was the proximity to magic and the general unknowable that made everyone so accepting of his new life.

He hadn't wanted to return to Hogwarts originally, but it was so difficult to say no to Harry. Especially when he knew that Harry would take Regulus's refusal as confirmation of Harry's guilt. Regulus couldn't allow that to happen. If he could do anything to save Harry some pain, he would do it.

The others, he was surprised to find, took his death nearly as hard as Harry had. Though he didn't know how they acted or felt when he was gone, the way they behaved upon seeing him again was telling enough.

Ron kept hanging around Regulus any chance he would get, though he was much quieter now, far more reserved than he had once been. Hermione, on the other hand, seemed to struggle to be near him. Every time they would make eye contact, she would start to tear up and have to excuse herself. Regulus didn't understand why she was so upset. He didn't particularly think of himself as someone who deserved to be mourned, let alone by so many people, so he found their reactions a bit bewildering.

Privately he thought that Luna took his death the hardest, even when weighed against the guilt Harry had shouldered. When she saw him alive for the first time, she threw herself against his chest with so much force that he was nearly knocked on his arse. Her nails dug into the skin on the back of his neck as she shook in his arms.

He thought she might be crying at first, but when she pulled away slightly, her face was free of tears. Instead, there was only an open and raw vulnerability there. "Without you, I don't have any friends. I was so sad to be alone again."

"Luna, no," Regulus breathed, "of course you have friends."

Luna grimaced. He'd never seen her be so expressive and it was beginning to distress him. "Not like they're friends with each other."

Regulus frowned, hugging her again. "Sometimes it just feels that way. I promise they care about you, okay?"

Luna made a shrugging gesture against him but ultimately nodded. He felt happy to see her again, but he could tell that she had been changed by his death. It fascinated him that a girl already so well acquainted with death would be so thrown by grief, but she'd clearly been shaken.

Beyond that small group, there weren't many others who knew about his death, and because it had mostly been kept out of papers — despite his so-called father gaining his freedom and

the media circus that had circled that all summer — he wasn't treated that differently when he returned to Hogwarts.

Neville, who had been with them at the Department of Mysteries, was beyond happy to see him, but he didn't seem haunted like the others, just relieved. Lavender and Parvati attacked him the moment they spotted him at King's Cross Station, pulling him into an empty compartment in the train so they could talk alone.

They spent approximately four minutes talking about how happy they were that he was alive before jumping into a long, torrid story about a boy Parvati had met over the summer. He was French apparently and had originally been interested in Padma, Parvati's twin, but Parvati had managed to worm her way into his heart — her words, not his.

"I'm sure Padma wasn't happy about that," Regulus said. He kept the judgment out of his voice. He knew the way teenagers would throw themselves into and out of relationships, the frivolous love stories they had were hardly something worthy of scorn. Even if they were, Regulus was not the one to offer it.

Lavender rolled her eyes dramatically. "Padma isn't interested in *boys*."

Regulus raised his eyebrows. "Oh?" he asked.

"Padma isn't into anyone," Parvati corrected with a stern look at Lavender. Lavender giggled quietly, covering her mouth with her hand.

"What do you mean?" Regulus asked.

"She's just not interested in romance," Parvati responded with a shrug. "She told me once that she thought the idea of kissing was stupid. I don't think she's ever read a romance novel, did you know that? Every time I try to give her one, she makes it halfway through before she has to give up. She says they're boring."

Regulus wasn't particularly interested in romance novels himself, though he read a fair few of them at the request of Lavender and Parvati. He kept his comments to himself though, only nodding thoughtfully as they went back to describing the French boy whose name they had yet to mention. Regulus wondered if his name even mattered in this context or if he was just a prop for their dramatic stories. The thought of a handsome French boy who probably thought he was hot shit being used like a toy just to be discarded when he was no longer interesting made Regulus laugh incorrigibly.

He finally got away from them an hour into the train ride. They were out of London by then, the world flying by outside the windows. He made his way down the train cars until he was abruptly stopped by Theo Nott. He looked different, more serious somehow — if that was even possible. He was already quite a serious child.

"You're alive," he said dryly.

"Yes," Regulus responded in the same tone of voice.

“Hm,” Theo said, squinting his eyes briefly as if trying to solve a challenging riddle.

“Good summer?” Regulus asked blandly. He leaned against the window nonchalantly. They were in the middle of the walkway, but this train car was relatively empty, most students already sequestered off with their groups of friends.

Regulus was wearing a very complicated glamour that he’d spent over a week perfecting, but he could still feel the subtle difference in his body from the way he felt when he’d died the second time. The physical difference between a fifteen-year-old and an eighteen-year-old didn’t seem like that much, but it felt insurmountable. One of the few things that he could not change with his glamour was his height. There were glammers that did exactly that, but they were often painful and wouldn’t last very long, so he opted to forgo them, hoping that everyone would just accept his summer growth spurt.

This was the first time he noticed his height though, because for once, he was taller than Theo. He didn’t expect that to last forever. If he remembered correctly, Theo Nott’s father was a huge, burly man who stood well over 182 cm. Theo would no doubt be just as tall, if not taller. However, right now, Theo seemed every bit the teenager that he was, even with the tough exterior that he was wearing like a costume.

“It could have been better,” Theo said slowly. “A bit chilly, for my taste.”

“Understandable,” Regulus responded evenly. He could hear what Theo wasn’t saying. The world was changing the longer the Dark Lord was out there building his forces and gaining power. Theo might not be directly involved — at least, not yet — but he could feel the shifts as they happened. “There’s a storm brewing.”

Both of them looked out the window at the same time. There was actually a storm in the distance, though Regulus had meant it metaphorically.

“Yeah,” Theo said, his eyes growing distant.

“Where will you be when it hits?” Regulus asked conversationally.

Theo hummed thoughtfully. “As safe as I can be. I’m hoping I won’t get wet at all.”

Regulus turned back to see Theo already watching him. He nodded once. “See you around, Theo,” he said.

Theo gave him a grim smile and sidestepped him so he could continue down the hallway. Regulus didn’t bother to watch him go. He stayed where he was for a moment, looking out at the dark storm clouds that were swirling and forming in the distance. There were already so many moving pieces. How was he going to make it out of this unscathed? He didn’t care about almost anyone last time, but now... He had so much to lose.

He found Harry, Neville, and Luna in a compartment near the back of the train a bit later. Ron and Hermione were probably still with the prefects doing their rounds and preparing for the start of the new school year.

“Hey Regulus,” Neville greeted. “Where have you been?”

Regulus rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “With Lavender and Parvati, of course. I had to get up to date on everything I missed.”

Neville and Harry laughed. Luna tilted her head. “Did they give you any new books?”

“Not yet,” Regulus said, lounging back in the seat next to Harry.

“I have one you can read,” Luna replied, jumping up from her seat and throwing her copy of the *Quibbler* to the side as she began to dig around in her suitcase.

“Is it something your father recommended? Because I don’t think I can bear to read another book about creatures in Japan that may or may not exist. Those books are too dense for me.”

“No,” she said. “It’s a muggle book. My mom left it to me and it has your name on it.”

Regulus looked on confused. He could see Neville giving them curious looks, but he wasn’t sure how much Luna was giving away.

“Here,” Luna said. She handed him an old book made of delicate pages. The title on the front page had been rubbed away. He opened it to find his name written on the first page: *It’s like Regulus*. He flipped it to the title page. *As Lonely as Franz Kafka* by Marthe Robert. It was published after his death but before Pandora’s. He wondered how much time she’d wasted thinking about him after he disappeared. Also, just like him? Was she really remarking on how lonely he had been even after he died?

“Oh,” he said listlessly. It didn’t feel like a compliment, though he didn’t know who Franz Kafka was. “Thanks, Luna.”

“Sure,” she said simply, returning to the *Quibbler*. Regulus set the book aside carefully. He would look at it more later, but the thought of having something of Pandora’s made him feel warm and nervous at the same time.

“Has anything exciting been going on here?” he asked in an effort to change the subject.

Neville gave Harry a small smirk and Harry’s face flashed red. Regulus watched him expectantly as Harry sputtered for a second, seemingly unable to explain what happened.

“Romilda Vane came around trying to talk to Harry,” Luna said, not bothering to look up from her reading. “She has a very big crush on him, but she doesn’t like me or Neville very much.”

Harry’s face got even redder, the bright color spreading to his ears and down his neck. It made his tapered scar look white as it contrasted against his bright red face. Regulus chuckled, relieved to see Harry embarrassed about something so normal.

“Who is Romilda Vane again?”

“She’s a fourth-year Gryffindor,” Neville said. “Apparently a bunch of boys have a crush on her.”

“Oh, I see, but she’s set her sights on Harry instead?” Regulus asked, grinning as Neville started laughing.

Harry started sputtering again. “She was — she was mean to Luna and Neville. I would never — I’m not interested — listen, no, stop laughing!”

Even Luna was laughing now, her shoulders shaking silently as she used her copy of the *Quibbler* to cover her face. Regulus couldn’t help it, though he felt bad for laughing at Harry so cruelly. It was just so mundane, so simple, to have a girl have a crush on you. It was so out of the ordinary for Harry’s life to be mundane.

“You are all so annoying,” Harry finally huffed but Regulus could see the smile pulling at his lips as he turned toward the window.

Ron and Hermione joined them a bit later, and eventually, Hermione and Harry left to go meet with Slughorn for lunch. Harry unrolled his letter from Slughorn with a frown but went anyway. Hermione just seemed surprised that she’d been given an invitation at all.

“I’m surprised you didn’t get one,” Ron said to Regulus with an expectant raise of his eyebrows.

“Slughorn is a slimy bastard,” Regulus said instantly. Ron looked shocked. “He always tries to collect students, but he has his favorite *type*. Like Harry’s mum because she was a muggleborn and actually smart — Slughorn saw that as an unusual quality.”

“That’s terrible,” Neville said.

Regulus nodded. “It’s not exactly a compliment to be invited. It just means that Slughorn thinks that he can use you for his own gain.”

“Harry and Hermione seemed more than willing to go,” Ron said gruffly.

“I wouldn’t read into it.” Regulus shook his head. “He’ll probably give a few students all his attention and then ignore the rest. Don’t take it personally.”

“You’re a good student though and you come from a powerful family. Why didn’t he invite you?” Ron asked. He seemed less annoyed now and more just curious.

Regulus shrugged. “He never liked Sirius,” Regulus said. “He probably thinks I’m just like my father.”

Ron scoffed, but his shoulders dropped slightly. Regulus was very familiar with Ron’s jealousy and he didn’t blame him for it. It had to be difficult to be in a family with so many children and to have friends who were either famous or high academic achievers. He could see the way Ron struggled with it, not wanting to burden others with the inadequacy he was feeling, but sometimes those feelings just permeated regardless and took over his good sense.

Regulus never judged him too much for his reactions. He was a jealous teenager as well — watching his brother from afar as he got to live a life that Regulus never would, a life of freedom, love, and authentic friendship. He had let his jealousy get the best of him more than a handful of times, so he understood how Ron felt better than almost anyone.

“What N.E.W.T.s are you taking?” Neville asked when the silence lingered on too long.

Ron answered first. “Divination, Charms, Defense, Herbology, and Transfiguration,” he said. “What about you?”

“You’re not taking Potions?” Neville asked. “I’m taking all of those except Divination, but with Potions as well.”

“Nah, didn’t get an Outstanding in my O.W.L.s so I can’t continue the class. You got an Outstanding?” Ron didn’t ask the question unkindly, but Neville blushed regardless.

“I did,” he said. “Actually, well — Snape was a big help.”

Regulus smiled encouragingly at Neville. “That’s great.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed genuinely though Regulus could tell from the way his eyebrows furrowed that the statement ‘*Snape was a big help*’ was more than a tad confusing to him.

“What about you?” Neville asked Regulus.

Regulus sighed. He’d originally planned to take as few N.E.W.T. level courses as possible, especially since he’d already taken and passed his N.E.W.T.s, but Harry, Hermione, and Sirius — for some unknown reason — had talked him into taking more. “Yeah, all of those,” he said, “and Runes and Muggle Studies. Not Divination, obviously.”

“Wow, Muggle Studies?” Neville asked.

Regulus shook his head slightly. “I got an Outstanding in it so I figured I might as well.” He’d also gotten an Outstanding in Astronomy, but he wasn’t willing to take that class again. He was eligible to take Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures, and History of Magic as well, but he could not care less about them and he was already overburdened with his current schedule.

Muggle Studies was the standout because he was actually interested in that topic, though he did his best not to mention it. He couldn’t shake the embarrassment he still felt over it. He had taken Runes the first time around, but he always felt like he could learn more, and given how useful they were, he couldn’t deny that it was a good idea.

“It’s going to be a rough year,” Ron muttered, rubbing his eyes tiredly. Regulus and Neville nodded in agreement.

“What O.W.L.s are you taking, Luna?” Neville asked, turning the conversation to her. She smiled brightly at him when he included her and Regulus felt content to watch them spend time together. He couldn’t believe that Luna thought she didn’t have friends. The concerns she spoke still rattled uncomfortably around in his head.

Hermione came back to join them not too long later, mentioning that Harry had gone off somewhere on his own. Regulus could already feel the parental stress weighing him down at Harry's absence.

"Who was in the Slug Club meeting?" Luna asked blandly like she didn't care about the answer.

"McLaggen," Hermione said with an obvious eye roll, "Ginny, Belby, Zabini, and Malfoy."

"Ginny was invited," Ron asked, his mouth dropping open. Regulus could see that spark of hurt back in his eyes. He would have to watch out for that this year, it would probably only get worse the more Harry played into the whole thing with Slughorn. Regulus knew he was doing it because Dumbledore asked him to, though neither of them knew exactly what he was after yet, just that it had to do with the Horcruxes.

"I'll be right back," Regulus said. Barely anyone paid him any mind, they were too busy complaining about how annoying McLaggen was. Regulus wasn't sure that he could remember who McLaggen was honestly, not that he cared.

He left the compartment quickly and instantly began his search. If Draco was at the meeting and Harry hadn't come back with Hermione, then there was only one other place he could be. Harry, no matter how much they discussed it, could not seem to let go of his hunt for Draco. Since they'd run into him in Diagon Alley, Harry had been relentless. Regulus was doing what he could to mitigate the issues Harry's obsession would certainly cause but it wasn't easy.

It was all made worse by the fact that Harry was absolutely right to be suspicious of Draco. Last Regulus had heard, the Dark Lord was going to brand him as a Death Eater, and though Regulus understood better than anyone what Draco was likely going through, he also knew that Harry and the others were unlikely to give Draco any leeway.

He found Draco in a compartment with his Slytherin friends. He had a sneer on his face as he spoke with Zabini. He was wearing a sharp black suit that looked far too expensive to be worn on a train ride to Hogwarts. There were deep dark circles under his eyes, but his skin had a sheen to it like he was wearing a poorly formed glamour. Regulus wondered what he was hiding beneath it.

He walked down past two more compartments before he found one that had three second-years in it. He ended up bribing all of them to abandon the compartment, sending one of them off to deliver a note to Draco. He settled down into one of the seats to wait, staring out the window as the sun began to dip below the horizon.

"Oh, it's you," Draco said as he slammed the door open. He strode into the compartment confidently, stopping the moment he was inside to cross his arms tightly across his chest. "What do you want?" he sneered.

Regulus cast a locking and silencing charm at the door, lowering the shade with a spell. "You're not even a little surprised to see me?" Regulus asked.

Draco didn't respond, but his jaw tightened.

"Sit down, Draco."

"Think I'll stand," Draco said stiffly. "Actually, I think I'll leave."

"Did he mark you?" Regulus asked quickly. Draco froze, looking at him with an expression so strained that Regulus thought he might faint for a second. His face cleared a moment later, back to the bored sneer that he was known for.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't lie to me, Draco," Regulus said.

"Stop saying my name!" Draco growled. He leaned down menacingly when he said it, baring his teeth.

Regulus shook off the part of him that wanted to transform into his animagus form for safety. That was a ridiculous response.

"Do you have one of these?" Regulus said sharply, lifting his sleeve to show the inflamed Dark Mark that was etched into his skin.

Draco flinched back from it, his back hitting the glass door loudly as he tried to get ahold of himself. "What —" he breathed.

Regulus looked down at the Dark Mark. Sometimes he could still feel the phantom pain of when the Dark Lord had seared it into his arm. It was one of the worst days of his first life — one of the worst days of his life in general. The regret that sat at the bottom of his throat like a noose for the rest of the day was suffocating. He kept running circles around his thoughts, trying to talk himself into feeling proud or satisfied with his choice to take the Dark Mark.

But James's soft face kept showing up in his thoughts. He already knew how James would react. He knew exactly how James would feel and his future alone became unavoidable. He'd felt like he had no other options at the time, and even looking back, he wasn't sure what else he could have done.

James had yelled at him, had told him that he could have asked for help. He thought that Regulus should have come to him or Sirius, or maybe even Dumbledore. But none of them could have protected him. The Dark Lord was everywhere, he was unstoppable, and the moment he was marked down as someone who might follow him, he knew he would never be free.

So he talked himself into believing that it was the right choice, that he was just doing what he had to do.

He looked back up at Draco who was staring at Regulus's Dark Mark like one might stare at a corpse. His face was pale and haunted, the glamour flickering dangerously like Draco's fear was making his magic fail. His features were unnaturally sharp, his gray eyes so bright that they nearly glowed.

“You can tell me, Draco. I won’t judge you,” Regulus said softly, finally dropping his sleeve. Draco’s eyes flicked up to his and for a moment, he looked like such a little kid that Regulus ached. He was so young. All of them were so young.

“I wasn’t — He didn’t mark me.”

Regulus blew out a breath through his nose. He felt so relieved. Snape had followed through, he had convinced the Dark Lord not to brand another sixteen-year-old. At the same as the relief filtered in, a feeling of loneliness and regret wove into it. He remained the only one that made that mistake.

“But he did give you a task,” Regulus said.

Draco’s face shuttered. “How do you know about that?”

“It’s not important —”

“You were dead,” Draco snarled suddenly. “You weren’t here, you don’t know what I had to — You can’t help me, so just stay away from me.”

“Or what?” Regulus asked, raising one eyebrow questioningly.

“Or I’ll make you regret ever coming back from the dead.” Draco yanked the door open, Regulus’s locking charm falling away as he did, and stomped out of the compartment.

Regulus leaned back in his seat, throwing his head back frustratedly. That could have gone better. If anything he had just pushed Draco further away. Draco was in a terrible position, and though Regulus didn’t know exactly what Draco had been asked to do, he understood the stress he must be under.

He had already decided that no matter what Draco was forced to do, Regulus would be there to help him, to give him safety when he needed it, and to offer forgiveness when he could.

the prophecy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Regulus didn't catch a glimpse of Harry as they left the train. He was walking toward the carriages when he got this gut feeling that he should go back. "I'll catch up with you guys," he said to the others, who gave him curious looks, but let him go without saying anything.

There were still people leaving the train when he walked back, the first years just now heading off with Hagrid to take the boats across the lake, so he leaned against one of the stone half-walls and decided to wait. He was glad that it hadn't started raining yet, but he knew it wouldn't be long. There would be a storm tonight he was sure. He knew it was odd, but he felt like his ability to feel shifts in the weather had become extremely sensitive since becoming an animagus. It was like he could smell changes in the air.

There were only a few students left, all of them moving slowly as they chattered away to one another, yet still Harry had not shown up. There was always a chance that he was on his way to the school with everyone else, perhaps already eating in the Great Hall with his friends, but Regulus just wasn't sure and he couldn't leave until he was.

When he heard the train rumble back to life, he decided that enough was enough and jumped up into a train car, beelining straight for the compartment where Draco and his friends had been talking. Every compartment that he passed was empty, as was to be expected. He finally arrived at Draco's compartment and walked inside. He had barely taken two steps before his foot collided with a body on the floor.

He reached down and grabbed the invisibility cloak, ripping it off Harry's frozen form. He was lying on his side, his face half-hidden by the seat.

"*Finite*," Regulus said. Harry gasped like he'd been suffocating and turned over looking shocked as he gazed at Regulus. His nose was broken and blood was dripping down his face.

"Regulus," he said. Regulus couldn't tell if he sounded angry or surprised, but there wasn't time to figure it out as the train started inching forward.

"Come on, we need to get off before it takes us all the way back to London," Regulus said, pocketing Harry's invisibility cloak and holding out a hand to help Harry up.

"Oh, boys! What are you still doing here? We have to go!" Tonks shouted suddenly, right as they exited the compartment.

"Coming," Regulus called. The three of them end up having to jump off the moving train, barely making it onto the platform before the Hogwarts Express really started to pick up speed.

“Harry, what happened to your nose?” Tonks asked once they were done catching their breath.

“Malfoy,” Harry said bitterly, his eyes flickering over to Regulus for a split second.

Tonks frowned for a second. Her hair was a dull brown that hung limply around her ears and forehead. He wondered if it was a conscious choice or not. If it was, then it definitely wasn’t a good one. The color didn’t suit her the way the bright reds, blues, and purples did.

“I can fix your nose if you stand still,” she said. Harry thought about it, then nodded. “*Episkey*.” Harry grunted as his nose was shifted back into place but the pain faded from his face a moment later.

The three of them walked together to the gates, all of the carriages were gone by then. Harry and Tonks talked quietly for a moment about why Tonks was there at all and she explained that she was one of four Aurors that had been stationed in Hogsmeade to protect the school, but beyond that Tonks seemed unusually serious and quiet. There was an unhappy tug on her lips. Snape met them at the gates, unlocking them and walking them up to the castle. He was also deathly silent, not even offering a snide comment as a greeting. It felt like Regulus had been away from Hogwarts for decades rather than a few months, already the world felt so different.

Regulus and Harry didn’t speak as they walked side by side. Regulus kept thinking about the fight he and Draco must have gotten into for Draco to leave him hidden and helpless under the invisibility cloak. The broken nose was also concerning, Regulus tossed a quick cleaning charm at Harry’s face without thinking. He doubted Harry would think to do it himself.

He shook his head, he would have to be more conscious of them this year if they were already starting their confrontations. He should have looked for Harry earlier when he knew something was up. It was stupid to wait till the last minute like he did.

Harry couldn’t be trusted to think straight when it came to Draco.

By the time they made it to the Gryffindor dorms that night, Regulus felt every bit the tired adult that he was. Harry, having been vindicated by the Ministry and the *Daily Prophet* in regards to his statements about Voldemort, was now more popular than ever. Students from every house watched him wherever he went, whispering and subtly (or not so subtly) pointing at him. Regulus noticed more than a few girls and a handful of boys preening when they thought Harry was looking.

Harry, for his part, seemed completely oblivious to the attention. Ron mentioned it, as Ron was wont to do, snickering as he said it, but Harry just shook his head like it hadn’t even crossed his mind, his eyes already drifting over toward where Draco was staring forlornly at the Slytherin table, his plate empty and untouched.

He and Harry had not gotten a chance to speak yet, but he could tell that Harry was already brooding. It wasn’t until everyone else was asleep that Harry shook Regulus to wake him up,

and gestured toward the door. Regulus was already awake, insomnia keeping his eyes open, so he stood quickly and followed Harry silently down to the common room.

It was surprisingly empty, all the students were already in their dorms. That was different from past years, and he wondered if the different environment of this year was making everyone more cautious.

Regulus opened his mouth to say something right when they sat down, but Harry beat him to it. “Draco left to talk to someone. Was that you?”

Regulus’s eyebrows furrowed. He didn’t appreciate how accusatory Harry sounded, though of course, Draco did leave to talk to him. “Why were you in his compartment at all?”

“Because I needed to hear what he and his friends were talking about since no one will take me seriously.”

Regulus huffed. “Harry, I am taking you seriously, but spying on Draco like that is dangerous.”

“So you agree that he’s dangerous,” Harry snarked.

“I agree that you're putting yourself at risk when I’ve already asked you to drop this.”

Harry threw his arms up in frustration. “Why are you protecting him? You know just as well as I do that he’s a Death Eater.”

“I don’t know that he’s a Death Eater.” *Lie*. “He’s just a kid.” At least that part was true.

“Which one is it? Is he just a kid or is he dangerous?” Harry asked.

Regulus gave him a sharp look. “It’s both. Clearly, he was able to best you if you ended up with a broken nose hidden under your own invisibility cloak.” Harry’s face turned red with anger. “I know you’re worried about what he’s up to, I get that, but there is more going on than your feud with him.”

“It’s not just a feud!” Harry shouted. “He really is a Death Eater. Why won’t you listen to me?”

“I *am* listening, and I’m telling you that I will handle it. You do not need to rush into this fight. It’s not your responsibility to deal with Draco.”

“It is if you and everyone else is just going to hold his hand while he helps Voldemort,” Harry snarled.

Regulus flinched. “I am not — I’m trying to make sure he doesn’t fall into the same trap I did.”

“He made his choice,” Harry said darkly. “There is no use trying to help him now.”

Regulus' stomach sank, he clenched his fists. "You have already put your friends in danger by not thinking before you act, I'm trying to make sure you don't make that mistake again with this."

Harry's mouth dropped open, his face going from bright red to white in the blink of an eye. Regulus' own words hit him a second after he said them and his chest felt abruptly tight.

"Harry," he said softly.

"No, you're right," Harry said stiffly. He jumped up from the chair and all but sprinted back up to the dorm room, away from Regulus.

Regulus leaned back into the chair with a heavy sigh, rubbing his eyes. Why did he say that? He knew that Harry felt guilty about what happened, he didn't need to add to it. Yet Harry's words about Draco were still knocking around in his head like a bludger. *He made his choice, there is no use trying to help him now*. That must have been how James felt, why they never spoke again. He was beyond help.

The worst part was that Regulus didn't disagree. He had been beyond help then. Sometimes he still felt he was beyond help. He didn't feel that way about Draco though. Draco was so young and he didn't have anyone to drag him out of that life.

Regulus had people who could have done that for him, but he refused to reach out for help. Too afraid or too proud to ask, and it wasn't like any of them were going to fight for him, not like they fought for each other or like he was prepared to fight for Draco.

He stayed down in the common room for a long time staring into the dying fire as the storm outside raged. He would have to apologize to Harry first thing in the morning. He didn't want to let this fight linger between them unaddressed. He was planning to go up to sleep soon, but the next moment he was being shaken awake.

"Reg," someone said.

"Sirius?" he said, disoriented, but when he opened his eyes, it was Harry staring back at him, his wide green eyes sad and concerned. "Oh, Harry. What—"

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "For what I said — you're right. I'm rushing in again. Sometimes it's just so hard to figure out what the right choice is, and I don't like that Malfoy could be a Death Eater, but I trust you. I know you won't let him hurt anyone." Harry was rambling, as he always did when he'd been overthinking.

Regulus felt like his head was full of cotton, and it took him a moment to understand everything Harry was saying, but when it all finally clicked, he relaxed significantly. "It's okay, Harry. I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have said that thing about you rushing in. You shouldn't feel bad for wanting to save Sirius's life."

Harry smiled, but it was a little strained. Regulus felt that guilt again, the one that never went away, and the burning question of whether he was even good for Harry, if he'd made the right choice coming back.

“What time is it?”

“Around four I think,” Harry said. “Are you coming up?”

“Yeah,” Regulus said, stretching his neck to the side, it already hurt from falling asleep in the chair. He followed Harry upstairs, still feeling unsettled.

“Do you remember me telling you we are practicing *nonverbal* spells, Potter?”

“Yes,” Harry replied, stiffly.

“Yes, *sir* .”

“There’s no need to call me ‘sir,’ Professor.”

Regulus lowered his face into both his hands, shaking his head even as he tried not to laugh. Ron, Seamus, and Dean weren’t even trying to hide their entertainment.

“Detention, Saturday night, my office,” Snape snapped.

Regulus should have known that having Snape teach Defense Against the Dark Arts would be bad for Harry and Snape. Those two could barely stand each other in a Potions classroom, but at least Harry still had something to learn there. He was too forceful in Defense though, especially after having so many bad professors in the subject. It was all a recipe for disaster.

“So, it's going to be one of those years, is it?” Regulus asked once the other students had left. He’d stayed behind to talk to Snape, as he felt he always had to at the beginning of a new school year.

Snape made a grunting noise. “I will not allow Potter to —”

Regulus rolled his eyes and groaned loudly. “He’s sixteen. Surely, you remember being that age.”

“I remember what James Potter was like at that age,” Snape said stormily.

“You’ve been teaching for how long now? And you still haven’t figured out how to handle a teenager? That’s just pathetic.”

“Why are you here?” Snape asked sharply.

“Just wanted to see how you were,” Regulus said mockingly. Snape gave him a dry look. “I wanted an update on Draco.”

Snape stared at him blankly before nodding once. “He has not taken the Dark Mark, but I cannot delay it forever. The Dark Lord is expecting him to take it following the end of his sixth year.”

Regulus swallowed. “I see, but the time you did buy is still useful. It gives us time to plan.”

“And what plan do you think you can create that would outsmart the Dark Lord?” Snape asked derisively.

Regulus sighed quietly, crossing his arms tightly over his chest as if to protect himself. “I don’t know. I’m not sure that Draco trusts me, and he hasn’t mentioned what he’s been asked to do. Do you know?”

Snape nodded once but didn’t offer an explanation.

“Does he trust you?”

“No,” Snape said. “He knows that I helped Dumbledore following the first war, but he doesn’t know where I stand. I doubt he will ask for my help if it comes down to it.”

“Great,” Regulus said tiredly. “There has to be a way to get through to him, to get him to ask for help.”

“If you can think of one, I would be happy to enact it.”

“Oh, happy to? Who are you exactly? I thought I was talking to Severus Snape. He’s this surly asshole —”

“You’ve been spending too much time with your brother,” Snape snapped, though there was no heat to his words. “And this might surprise you, but I do not wish for any harm to come to Draco anymore than you do.”

“You’re getting soft in your old age,” Regulus said after a beat of silence.

Snape was quiet for a disturbingly long moment. “You’re probably right.”

He met the others in Potions later. With Slughorn teaching, both Ron and Harry were able to join the class last minute. Neither of them had the supplies for it, so during their break in classes, Regulus hiked up to the owlery to see Nyx and send out an order for both of them. He decided to just pay for Ron’s as well as Harry’s while he was there. It would make everything easier and he knew Ron didn’t like having to ask his parents to buy extra school supplies.

On his way back to the dungeons, he was handed a slim piece of parchment by one of the Gryffindor beaters. Regulus thought his name was Sloppy or something, but he couldn’t recall.

Dear Regulus,

I would like to speak with you in private. Kindly come along to my office at 8 p.m. I hope you are enjoying your first day back at school.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

P.S. I enjoy Acid Pops.

Regulus raised his eyebrows curiously and stuffed the letter into his pocket. He'd been expecting Dumbledore to be unreachable again this year, but clearly, that wasn't the case. He was relieved though, it was better to have a scheduled meeting with the man rather than having to corner him.

Potions was just as annoying as he expected it to be. Slughorn was more than a little creepy with Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Regulus. He didn't even like Regulus — that much was obvious — but he kept coming around and saying unsettling things like, “You know I knew the other Regulus Black. He was such a smart young man. I wonder whatever happened to him.”

By the end of class, even Ron was glaring at the man, no longer caught up in subtly trying to preen for his attention. “He really is a prat,” Ron whispered.

“I told you,” Regulus said commiseratingly. He was already in a bad mood after he was forced to smell Amortentia the moment he entered the classroom. Broom polish, forest floor, and Sleekeazy. That scent had haunted him for years. He could still remember brewing Amortentia during his first life — when James and Lily had already started dating — when he'd ended up sabotaging his potion just so he wouldn't have to smell it. It was the only class he'd received a bad mark in for the whole year.

After the intro to the class, Slughorn had sent them on their way to brew the Draught of Living Death to try and win a small vial of Felix Felicis. Regulus was pretty sure he could have managed it if he really tried but he wasn't keen on stealing the opportunity from the other students, so he worked slowly, messing up periodically so that his potion wouldn't be perfect.

Draco was working meticulously as if his life depended on it. He guessed that he wanted the Felix Felicis to complete whatever impossible task he'd been given. It was exactly the kind of thing the Dark Lord would do. He loved giving his followers, especially the young ones, impossible tasks just so that he could punish them when they failed. He loved teaching them that they weren't above his wrath.

Harry, on the other hand, was using curious methods that Regulus hadn't seen before. He was looking at his book carefully — it was one that he'd borrowed from Slughorn's stack — and he kept raising his eyebrows like he was surprised. Whatever he was doing was working though, clearly better than what the rest of them were doing.

“How are you doing that?” Hermione demanded, staring down at his cauldron. Her hair was sticking up in every direction, it had been steadily growing larger the longer she worked on her potion, and there was a bright blush spread across her nose.

“Add a clockwise stir—”

“No, no, the book says counterclockwise!”

Regulus could already see this going wrong like a train wreck he couldn't stop watching. Harry won the Felix Felicis, and both Hermione and Draco watched him with envious eyes. When Ron asked him how he'd done it as they were leaving class, Harry had simply responded, "Got lucky I guess." However, later at the Gryffindor table, he finally explained the book he'd grabbed.

"Can I see it?" Regulus asked.

"You're not going to take it from me, are you?" Harry asked suspiciously. Regulus snickered.

"No, I'm just curious."

Harry handed it to him before turning to Hermione. Regulus opened the book, instantly spotting the writing on the first page. *This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince*. He didn't recognize the name or the handwriting, but clearly, this Half-Blood Prince was some kind of Potions prodigy.

"I suppose you think I cheated?" Harry asked Hermione.

"Well, it wasn't exactly your own work, was it?"

"He only followed different directions to ours," Ron said.

"Yeah, he was still the one to brew the potion. Notes can only take you so far even if they are useful," Regulus added.

Hermione looked furious. "How can you say that? There is no way Harry could have brewed that potion better —"

"Better than you?" Harry asked. He looked like he was holding in a smug smile.

Ginny joined in a second later, demanding to know if he was following instructions from a book. He knew she was thinking about Tom Riddle's diary, but even Regulus was unbothered by the comparison and he'd been actively possessed by the object.

"It's just a student's old textbook," Regulus explained. He closed the book and handed it back to Harry. "I say use it, just be careful."

"I will be," Harry said, giving him a small smile which Regulus returned. Hermione continued arguing with Harry, as did Ginny, but Regulus tuned them out. He did wonder who the book belonged to, and why the student hadn't taken it with them after making such meticulous notes, but for now, he had more important things to focus on.

"Acid Pops," Regulus said quietly as he approached the statue that guarded Dumbledore's office. It sprung aside, revealing the staircase for him to climb. He did so slowly, his legs and back aching after a long day back to classes. It wasn't nearly as bad as it had been before he died, but it was still uncomfortable. He would need to go see Madam Pomfrey to get some pain relief potion at some point.

He didn't bother knocking as he entered Dumbledore's office. If he wasn't prepared to see Regulus yet after giving him a specific time then that was on him.

"Good evening, Regulus," Dumbledore said evenly the moment he entered as if he could sense him coming.

"Hello," he replied. His feelings about the headmaster had shifted since they first spoke during his first year at Hogwarts. Originally he'd felt grateful that Dumbledore had allowed him to stay, and that he had an ally in the school; he'd also been grateful that Dumbledore wasn't the kind of man to overreact.

He still appreciated his level head, so few people managed that well, yet Dumbledore always seemed to consider things thoroughly before making a decision. However, as the years went by, Regulus felt less indebted to the man. His allegiances were always to Harry, no matter what, and though Dumbledore seemed to have his own fondness for Harry, Regulus was under no false assumptions that Dumbledore held Regulus's Harry-lives-at-all-costs attitude. No one did really, except perhaps Sirius and Remus.

"Please sit," Dumbledore said. "I have something important to discuss with you."

"Of course," Regulus said.

"Can I offer you some tea?"

"I'm fine," Regulus replied quickly. He didn't want to linger here if he could help it. "What did you want to discuss?"

Dumbledore paused for only a moment, before speaking. "What do you know about prophecies?"

"Not much beyond what I learned in Divination," Regulus said, then added, "So nothing. Why?"

"As you know, Voldemort and his Death Eaters successfully lured Harry to the Department of Mysteries only a few months ago. Do you know why?"

"No," Regulus said though his stomach was already dropping.

"There is a prophecy, one made about Harry Potter and Tom Riddle. Voldemort was after it, he had been sending Death Eaters for months trying to steal it with no success. You see, only people of whom a prophecy is about can retrieve that prophecy."

Regulus nodded in understanding. "That's why they needed Harry."

"Exactly. They lured Harry there hoping to trick or force him into taking the prophecy and giving it to one of them. However, they failed. The prophecy was destroyed during the battle."

"Why did the Dark Lord want it so badly?"

“He believed that it contained vital information regarding Harry, about how he had survived the Killing curse and how he might be destroyed.”

Regulus’s mouth dropped open for a second before he clicked it closed. “Why didn’t we try to get it then? We could have had Harry grab it at any time?”

“Because,” Dumbledore said, “I already know what the prophecy said. There was no need to retrieve it.”

Regulus felt goosebumps spring up on his arms. “Who else knows about this?”

“No one, not in full. Harry knows that there was a prophecy, and I intended to tell him at the end of last year what was contained within it, but given your death, he was not interested in speaking with me. Or anyone for that matter.”

“I see,” Regulus said softly. “But you didn’t tell Sirius? He’s Harry’s official guardian now.”

“I did not. I had a busy summer,” Dumbledore said, and without preamble raised his right hand. Regulus hadn’t noticed that he was holding it beneath the table, blocking it from view. Once he laid eyes on it though he understood why. It was half dead, a black curse spreading out from the knuckles. “I did not have time to speak with Sirius, and before long, you had returned, and the time had passed.”

“And now you think I’m the person to tell. Why?” Regulus asked suspiciously, finally dragging his eyes away from Dumbledore’s dead hand.

“You care for Harry and though Sirius officially adopted him, you have acted as his guardian and advocate since his first year at Hogwarts. I want to train Harry, but I am not a fool. He will do nothing without your say so.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows in shock. That was just ridiculous given the amount of times Harry had directly disregarded something Regulus had told him to do or not do. He wasn’t sure that he had that kind of control over Harry, but he wasn’t about to tell Dumbledore that.

“What did the prophecy say?”

“Do you mind if I show you?” Dumbledore gestured over toward his pensieve. Regulus nodded once at him before walking over and dipping his face into the water without pause, his body tense like an animal about to pounce.

As he fell into the memory, he dropped into a conversation between Dumbledore and a much younger Trelawney. They looked like they were at Hog’s Head Inn, though he’d never been in that specific room, the walls still looked familiar. He only caught a few words of their conversation before Trelawney fell into a kind of trance, her voice coming out raspy and croaking.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of

the other, for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

He ripped his head out of the pensieve the moment she was done speaking and took two steps back. *Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives .*

"You've known about this the whole time?" Regulus asked. He was struggling to control his panting, but his heart was racing, his thoughts rushing through his head so fast that he couldn't track them.

"It was the reason I sent James and Lily Potter into hiding. Frank and Alice Longbottom as well. We did not know which child it would be about until Voldemort attempted to kill Harry."

It could have been Neville, he thought, a cruel twist to his stomach as he felt a second of thoughtless wishing that it had been.

"How did the Dark Lord know about this?" Regulus asked, finally turning to look at the man. He was standing next to his desk now, leaning partially to the side.

"One of his Death Eaters overheard it. Do you understand now why I wanted to teach Harry?"

"No," Regulus said breathlessly, realizing a moment later how seriously he held that opinion. "No, if Harry is responsible for this, then I will train him. My brother and I." He shook his head. "He's just a teenager, he's too young to... to kill anyone."

"Regulus —"

"No, you asked for my permission and you don't have it. He deserves to be a kid, even if just for a little bit longer. I won't — I won't subject him to this."

Dumbledore frowned at him. "Very well. That is all that —"

"What happened to your hand? I've seen cursed flesh before, there is no cure," Regulus demanded boldly.

Dumbledore looked dazedly down at his hand. "A moment of arrogance," he mumbled. "And you are correct, there is no cure."

"Are you dying?" Regulus asked.

"We are all dying, but it is not a pressing matter."

Regulus decided not to push it, but he could hear the non-answer in Dumbledore's phrasing.

"What is it that you need from Slughorn? The thing you had to use Harry for."

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said, his eyes clearing slightly.

Regulus left shortly after feeling unsatisfied despite what he'd learned. Dumbledore had shown him the memory of young Tom Riddle asking about Horcruxes. Slughorn had given him a false memory, what truth did his real memory hold? He walked back to the common room slowly, enjoying the empty corridors, all the while hearing Trelawney's croaking voice. *Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives .*

Chapter End Notes

in canon, draco isn't invited to join the slug club bc his father was arrested with the rest of the death eaters. since lucius was never arrested in this version, draco is part of slughorn's club

the unforgivable.

Regulus had thought that the Half-Blood Prince was a mostly harmless addition to Harry's education. However, he hadn't been expecting the Half-Blood Prince to be so adept at creating spells. Late in the evening one night in the dorm room, Harry lifted his wand after reading his potion's book and pointed it at the wall.

He hadn't spoken but suddenly, there was a flash of light and a yell as Ron was dragged off his bed and lifted so that he was dangling upside down in the middle of the room as if someone had put a hook through one of his ankle

"Sorry!" Harry shouted, jumping up from his bed and waving his hands around in panic. Regulus felt panic also, but not for the same reason as Harry. No, he'd seen that spell.

"What did you just cast?" Regulus asked.

"Can you ask him after you get me down?" Ron said frantically.

"Oh, right," Harry said, then looked down at his wand. "Uh."

"*Finite*," Regulus said, chuckling. He cast a subtle *Arresto Momentum* on him as well so that he didn't fall directly onto his skull. He'd seen James, Sirius, Remus, and Snape do that enough times to know that it wasn't fun.

"What was that?" Ron asked once he was firmly on his feet.

Harry looked uncomfortable as if he thought he might be in trouble. "It was in the potions book," Harry mumbled.

"Can I see?" Regulus asked. Harry looked, for a moment, like he might refuse but then passed over the book, indicating the page where he'd found the spell.

Regulus spotted it instantly, scribbled on the corner of the page: *Levicorpus (nvbl)* .

"Are there any other spells in this book?" he asked.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I haven't read the whole thing yet. Why?"

"Look through it and see if you can find any others," Regulus said. "And don't try them!"

"Okay," Harry said giving him a curious look. "Why?"

Regulus sighed. "I just have a feeling about that book, and I need to be sure I'm right before I do anything about it."

"You're not going to take it from me, are you?" Harry asked.

Regulus rolled his eyes so hard that it hurt. “For the last time, I’m not going to take it from you. Also, you could just copy all of these notes into the book that *I* purchased for you.”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said, his face clearing. Regulus did his best not to roll his eyes again.

Early the next morning when Regulus finally dragged himself up from a restless sleep, he found Harry lying on his stomach reading the book closely and periodically writing notes in his new copy.

“Find anything?” Regulus asked.

Harry looked up sharply like he’d forgotten he wasn’t alone. He really did have the ability to get consumed by things when he wanted to, it was like he had tunnel vision when he found something interesting: a book full of potion notes, new defensive spells, and Draco Malfoy.

He admitted that he could be more generous in the way he described Harry’s obsession with Draco, perhaps it was just because he was suspicious of the boy, but honestly, it had been going on for years at that point, and Regulus highly doubted that it was suspicion alone that made Harry blind to everything else when Draco was around.

“Erm, yeah, I did.” He held out the book, showing a small bit of writing that said *Sectumsemper (for enemies)* .

“Huh,” Regulus said thoughtfully.

“Do you recognize it?” Harry asked. The dark shadows on his face were making his green eyes look even brighter, it was a bit unsettling.

“Did you sleep at all?”

Harry shrugged. “A bit.”

“Harry,” he admonished.

“What? It’s just a Hogsmeade day. It’s not like we have classes.”

“I guess,” Regulus admitted. “And no, I don’t recognize it, but if it’s for enemies, well that’s not a good thing. I think *semper* means always and *sectum* means separate or maybe cut? I’m not sure.”

“How do we figure it out?” Harry asked.

Regulus hummed for a moment before throwing one of his pillows onto the ground. “*Sectumsemper*,” he whispered. The effect of the spell was instant, slashes appearing across the pillow, shooting feathers around the room. As they watched, more and more slashes appeared.

“Oh,” Harry said quietly.

“Glad you didn’t accidentally cast that at Ron,” Regulus said.

“Huh?” Ron grunted in his sleep.

Harry’s face was deathly pale. “Yeah... who would create a spell like that? And why?”

Regulus frowned. Why indeed. “I’m not sure. I think you should finish copying everything over and leave the spells out of it, just in case someone catches you with the book.”

What he didn’t say was that he knew the reason someone might create a spell like that, something so violent, almost guaranteed to cause a fast and painful death: to kill a werewolf.

They went down to breakfast not long after. It was bitterly cold in the castle, a snowstorm had hit overnight and the fires inside hadn’t yet warmed up the stone corridors. He was still a bit tired, but he hadn’t been sleeping well. He hadn’t slept well since he came back from the dead for the second time, beyond perhaps that first sleep when he’d been dead on his feet.

He couldn’t help but blame James for it, though he knew it likely wasn’t James’s fault. Since he’d discovered the lack of James’s presence, the emptiness inside him, he’d struggled to get any real rest. It wasn’t loneliness exactly, more like a piece of him was missing, as if it had been ripped from him when he was dragged back through the veil.

Sometimes he thought about those feelings he’d had of not being alone even through the dark, emptiness that was death beyond the veil. He wondered if when that person grabbed his hand they’d taken something from him. He rubbed his chest unconsciously. The thought of James always hurt so badly, it had for years, but now it was paired with this haunted feeling of abandonment that was completely misplaced. James had abandoned him years ago, there was no reason for him to feel it now.

It didn’t help that he’d dreamt of one of the fights he and Sirius had gotten into when they were young. It wasn’t long after they both started Hogwarts, but Regulus was already beginning to resent Sirius and his *wonderful* friendships, so when Sirius started complaining about their family, Regulus took it to mean that he was complaining about him specifically and responded in kind.

He used to tear into his brother, the hurt and anger he felt morphing into a haughty condemnation of Sirius’s choices, as if he wasn’t just a kid also, begging to be loved and accepted just as Regulus was. He had the benefit of hindsight now, but it was so painful to watch them hurt each other. They were weapons wielded by their parents, used to cut each other down to size, so they would be easier to control.

“I can’t believe that you’re okay with this,” Hermione said furiously.

“What?” Regulus asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

Hermione growled frustratedly. “Are you even listening?”

“No,” Regulus said honestly. “What are you guys talking about?”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but Harry was the one to answer. “She’s mad about the spells we found in that potions book

“I don’t think this Half-Blood Prince should be trusted,” Hermione said sharply.

“Really?” Regulus asked. “I would have thought that the idea of creating spells from scratch would fascinate you.”

She glared at him, but he refused to back down.

“Or is it just that Harry is doing well in a class you’re usually the best at that upsets you?”

Her mouth dropped open. “No, that’s not it,” Hermione said.

“The spells the Half-Blood Prince created, or at least wrote about, are unusual and some are dangerous, but that doesn’t mean that his notes about potions aren’t brilliant. Clearly, he was intelligent. Besides, that’s how magic is researched and discovered. If everyone always followed the Ministry-approved spells and guidelines, then we wouldn’t ever have new potions. We wouldn’t have wolfsbane, that’s for sure.”

Hermione pursed her lips. He knew she hated, more than anything, to be proven wrong. She attached her self-worth to her ability to be the smartest in any room she entered, but no one knew everything, even her. She was like Ron in so many ways, using her insecurity as a weapon against her friends. He was just like that when he was a teenager, so he understood it well.

“I guess,” she muttered stiffly. “But I still don’t trust it.”

It wasn’t a complete admission that he was right, but it was a little bit of growth and that was all he could hope for.

It was a miserable day outside when they finally started the journey to Hogsmeade. Regulus was wearing thick gloves and his warmest scarf, wrapped tightly around his neck and mouth. He cast a few warming charms on everyone, but he could still see them shivering. Lavender and Parvati joined them on their walk down, Padma crushed between them as they huddled together for warmth.

Luna, Hermione, and Harry were doing the same thing. Despite Hermione’s bad mood that morning, she seemed happy now, even with the terrible weather. Harry was saying something to her and she was laughing lightly. Luna was just nodding in agreement at whatever he was talking about.

Ron was next to Regulus but luckily he didn’t seem inclined to cuddle while they walked. Regulus was pretty sure that would be a touch too weird for the two of them. They were walking in the back of the group, Regulus because his legs were already hurting — exacerbated by the cold — and Ron, he guessed, because he didn’t want Regulus to walk alone. He could see the tiny steps he was taking to try and match Regulus’s pace. He had shot up in height over the summer and now towered over everyone in their group, including Regulus.

They all piled into the Three Broomsticks the moment they arrived in Hogsmeade. It was packed, most students finding a warm haven inside the building. “You guys find somewhere to sit. Ron, let’s go get drinks.”

Ron followed him up to where Rosmerta was pouring a few shots of firewhiskey. She grinned in greeting, winking at Ron in a way that made Ron’s face flash instantly red. They were in the middle of ordering for everyone when Regulus caught a flash of white-blond hair walking into the girls’ bathroom. He couldn’t be sure who it was, but he only knew two people with that color of hair and Luna was sitting next to Padma at the table.

He made a split-second decision. “I’ll be right back,” Regulus said to Ron who was barely listening, busy ogling Rosmerta. He set down a pile of Galleons, making sure that Rosmerta saw them before he walked off.

He headed right to the girls’ bathroom, casting a quick disillusionment charm on himself as he came in. He was right in time to watch Draco point his wand between Katie Bell’s confused eyes and say, “*Imper* —”

“*Expelliarmus*,” Regulus said sharply. Katie looked at him with panic then back at Draco.

“What is wrong with you?” Katie said. She looked horrified, rightfully so, and pushed past to run out of the bathroom. Draco’s expression morphed from concentration to anger to panic in a split second.

“Shit,” Regulus said quietly. “*Obliviate*.” He just modified one memory, just a tiny one, so that Katie Bell wouldn’t remember that they were in there. She left looking only slightly dazed. It wouldn’t hurt her, Regulus said to himself. It wouldn’t hurt her. He locked and silenced the door thoughtlessly. “What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Draco didn’t reply, his face was taking on that sharp quality and his back was firmly against the wall behind him.

“Were you about to cast an *Unforgivable* on another student? Have you lost your mind? Do you know what that would mean? What were you going to do to her? Draco! Answer me!”

“It wouldn’t have hurt her,” Draco mumbled.

“What were you doing?” Regulus said slowly through clenched teeth.

“It’s none of your business,” Draco said.

“Oh, then you won’t mind if I go outside and tell one of the Aurors what you were doing in here.”

“You wouldn’t,” Draco dared.

Regulus stared at him for a moment. “I will if it’s the only way to stop you from destroying your life.”

“You think getting caught using an Unforgivable wouldn’t ruin my life?”

“Then why are you using one in the first place?” Regulus was shouting now. He rarely shouted so it hurt his throat to do so.

“Just drop it,” Draco said, moving like he was also going to leave the bathroom, but Regulus shoved him roughly so that his back collided with one of the sinks. He cried out in pain and shock. “What?”

“I am not going to let you hurt anyone. I have already offered to help you. We’re family, I’ll do everything I can to help you. You have to know that. But I’m not going to let you hurt anyone else, especially another student. Now, tell me what you were doing.”

Draco stared at him silently, he looked angry but Regulus was pretty sure that was just to cover up the fear. When he didn’t reply, Regulus took a step forward and started digging in his cloak pockets. Draco was trying to fight him off, but his hands were shaking, making his movements awkward and slow. Regulus found a package in one pocket and ripped it out.

“No! Don’t open that!” Draco yelled.

“What is it?” Regulus said, holding it back above his head. Draco didn’t reply so he started to tear into the wrapping.

“NO! If you touch it, it’ll kill you!” Draco said.

Regulus looked at him sharply. “You were going to give this to Katie Bell. Why?”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt her. She wouldn’t have even remembered!”

“Who, Draco? Who was it for? Tell me now.” He pointed his wand at Draco’s chest.

Draco swallowed harshly and squeezed his eyes shut. “Dumbledore.”

Regulus didn’t gasp, didn’t react at all, because of course — *of course* — it was Dumbledore. “Do you have anyone else under the Imperius Curse?”

Draco shook his head, but he was avoiding eye contact like he was afraid Regulus would use Legilimency on him.

“Tell me the truth. I will fix it. Tell me who it is,” Regulus said stiffly.

It took a long few seconds before Draco muttered, “Rosmerta.”

Regulus squeezed his eyes closed. “Go back to the castle. Now. We will talk about this later.”

“You can’t help me,” Draco muttered.

“Just try and stop me,” Regulus snapped back.

He didn’t rejoin Harry and the others for butterbeers, instead, he called his brother. He used a patronus, his bear erupting out of his wand in a grandiose fashion that he thought was a little

much. Sirius showed up not long later, meeting him in the Hog's Head.

"I need you to get rid of this," he said instantly.

"What is it?" Sirius asked.

"Some cursed object. Don't touch it, it'll kill you if you do."

Sirius raised his eyebrows slightly. "Where did you get it?" Sirius sounded oddly unsurprised even as he asked, and Regulus wondered if he should feel insulted.

"Please don't ask me, I can't talk about it yet."

Sirius gave him a look but nodded. "Fine," he said.

"Thank you," Regulus said, feeling relieved.

He waited until the Three Broomsticks was nearly empty before he paid a visit to Rosmerta. There wasn't a way to remove someone else's Imperius Curse, but he could see from the confused look in her eyes that Draco had already released her. It only took a little bit of prodding to find out that she knew who had cast it on her.

He obliviated her just as he had Katie Bell and walked back to the castle feeling like a true member of his awful family. It was the kind of horrible, immoral thing his father would have done, underhanded and extremely illegal. Sometimes he forgot that he was still one of them, that he was no better than them.

Beyond everything happening with Draco, there wasn't much of a difference between fifth and sixth year. Except, perhaps, the needless theatrics that came with being a teenager, because the thing about teenagers was that they were hormone-filled monsters. Regulus was well aware of this — it wasn't that long ago that he was a teenager himself and yes he was physically a teenager again, but he still felt ill-prepared to deal with the hideous drama that would erupt around a hoard of sixteen-year-olds.

He was almost glad that he'd come back in his eighteen-year-old body rather than his sixteen-year-old one. He wasn't sure that he could handle another year of furiously jerking off every time he needed to get a little bit of reading done. Although being an eighteen-year-old wasn't much better, it was enough of a difference that he didn't feel consumed by it.

It helped that he wasn't tempted by anyone around him. During his first life, there were the memories of James to contend with along with the frequent sounds that Barty made in his bed that would worm their way into Regulus's psyche and haunt his thoughts. There was also that one Ravenclaw seventh year that he would never admit he found attractive — not even to himself, he wouldn't dare utter the name. (Also the muggleborn his cousin Andromeda ran away with, but that was his most shameful secret.)

In his second life, he was interested in exactly zero people. He didn't even think about James like that. Well, not when he could help it. Which was most of the time, thank you very much,

although... He had his moments of weakness. He wasn't proud of them.

Regardless, there was no drama in his own life for him to contend with. No, the drama belonged to everyone else that he knew. Even Sirius, who called with regular frequency through the mirror to complain about nearly everything in his life except Remus. When it came to Remus, Sirius was suspiciously silent. Sirius's silence was as much a warning sign as anything.

Harry was in his own league of sexual awareness. Not his own sexual awareness, of course, he was about as far from that as he could possibly get, but within the sexual awareness of others. He was asked out repeatedly by girls who had never spoken to him, he'd had more than one attempt to sneak him love potions, and he was stared at nearly everywhere he went.

Probably the most egregious candidate for these stares was Romilda Vane who found Harry every single day in an attempt to talk to him. There was also Ginny Weasley who had apparently been nursing a crush on Harry since before they met and continued to do so despite her relationship with his dorm mate, Dean Thomas. They were always on the outs though, if Regulus had to guess, he would say that they didn't really like each other and they wouldn't last past Easter.

Not that Harry expressed an interest in anyone in return. The last time he'd seen Harry be interested in someone it was Cho, and maybe Cedric but he didn't like to think about that. However, he seemed to be too consumed with thoughts of Draco that year to think of much else.

Hermione had her own admirers, though she seemed just as disinterested in them as Harry did. At least Hermione was aware of them though, unlike Harry who just acted like it was his first day on Earth. There weren't nearly as many as there were for Harry, but they were just as pushy.

The most aggressive one was McLaggen — a seventh year that Regulus had no memory of despite attending Hogwarts with him for six years. He was cocky, the perfect archetype of the dickhead Gryffindor, and he had a possessive interest in Hermione that set Regulus's teeth on edge. He did his best to stay out of it, if Hermione wanted his help she would ask for it, but he couldn't deny that he found it annoying.

Ron, much like Harry, was also keenly unaware of the people who were interested in him. They definitely existed, Regulus had noticed them, but they weren't as obvious as Harry's. He noticed a handful of quiet girls in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff who would watch Ron as he strutted through the corridors, but most of them were too timid to approach him.

He was also sure that he saw Hermione's eyes linger on Ron more than once, though he would never say anything to either of them about it. He thought that Ron might feel the same, he'd thought it since third year if he was honest, but he wasn't sure that Ron was even aware of his own feelings. Still, he'd been expecting it to come to a head this year, especially after Hermione quietly asked Ron to come with her to Slughorn's Christmas party.

What he had not been expecting was for Lavender to choose Ron as her crush of the year. It was something she and Parvati had done since second year apparently, though he'd only

learned about it recently.

“What do you mean you chose them?” Regulus asked. They were meeting up in the Divination classroom late in the evening. Though he’d dropped the class after O.W.L.s, they both still spent so much time in Firenze’s classroom that he often met them there to discuss books.

“Well, we just pick whichever boy we want to be interested in, and then we focus on them,” Lavender said.

Regulus looked to Parvati for help, but she was smiling at Lavender, grinning in that silly way that Sirius sometimes did at Remus.

“I don’t understand,” Regulus confessed.

Lavender rolled her eyes exasperatedly. “Honestly Regulus, how do you pick your crushed?”

“My — I don’t — I haven’t had a crush on anyone... before. In a while,” he corrected pathetically, unusually caught off guard by the question. “I’m not sure choice held any place in the matter.”

“Really?” she said disbelievingly.

“Yes, really.”

“What about Alexander?”

Regulus had forgotten all about Alexander, the sweet boy from Beauxbatons who had asked him to the Yule Ball. “Pretty sure he was the one interested in me, not the other way around,” Regulus explained.

“Well, whatever,” Lavender said with a half shrug. “Not all of us can be so lucky. Love takes work, Regulus. You can’t just expect it to happen to you. Right, T?” She turned to look at Parvati who raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth slightly.

“Huh?”

“Who is your crush this year?” Lavender asked.

“Oh! I haven’t chosen one yet.” She looked over at Regulus, a blush on her cheeks. She looked deeply embarrassed though Regulus didn’t understand why. “What about you?” she asked, turning back to Lavender.

Lavender gave a smug smile. “Ron Weasley.”

“Ron?” Parvati asked with a laugh.

“What?” Lavender asked though she was laughing too. “He got very tall over the summer and a ton of girls like him. He would be a real get.”

“I don’t know, he wasn’t that great of a date to the Yule Ball,” Parvati said, uncertainly.

“He was just a kid then,” Lavender said. “He’s a man now.” A sharp, predatory grin spread across her face.

“Right, well. I better head off,” Regulus said quickly, already sensing the way the conversation was shifting.

He didn’t think much of it again, not for a few weeks, even as Lavender started to openly flirt with Ron. It was clearly starting to do Hermione’s head in, though she was very valiantly trying to pretend like it didn’t matter. Parvati would always nod encouragingly and giggle commiseratingly with Lavender when she returned from her mission.

It wasn’t until the night of their first Quidditch Game that they won against Slytherin. Harry was in a bad mood — not one of the terrible strops that he sometimes got into, but just normal teenage disappointment. Sirius and Remus were supposed to come to watch him since it was his first game as captain, but they had to cancel.

There was a whole drama with Ron believing that Harry added Felix Felicis into his drink that morning to help him with the game. Regulus was spectacularly uninterested in it, but he was mildly interested in the tense argument that erupted between Ron and Hermione when she confronted Harry about it.

Really, he should have seen the disaster brewing, but he was unaware until he was walking around the party in the Gryffindor common room with Harry a bit later that night and witnessed Ron and Lavender making out so aggressively that it looked like they were trying to eat each other.

“Eugh,” Harry said, he turned slightly as if to look away before saying, “Oh no.” Regulus followed his eyeline just in time to watch Hermione storm out of the common room.

“Oh,” he said softly. He looked back at Ron and Lavender and caught the exact moment that Parvati stood up from where she’d been sitting near the window and saw them as well. He should have realized with the way she had been staring at Lavender, but he’d been trying very hard to avoid all the teenage angst.

Her face fell, her eyes looking suspiciously wet. He’d seen that face so many times. He’d made that face. He remembered the unique pain of watching the person you like kiss someone else, especially for the first time.

“You should go talk to Hermione,” Regulus said.

Harry already had a set to his jaw and he nodded. “Yeah,” he agreed, making his way over toward the portrait of the Fat Lady. Regulus, meanwhile, strode as quickly as he could through the crowd to Parvati. When she noticed him, she tried to clear her face, but she wasn’t skilled at it, the upset still showing through the cracks in her mask.

“Come on,” he said, wrapping a protective arm around her shoulders and blocking her view of Ron and Lavender. He led her up the stairs to one of the more secluded areas in the

common room. They could still hear the music where they were, but it was muffled, giving everything a dream-like feel.

“I’m okay,” Parvati said, but her voice was uneven.

“It’s all right if you’re not,” Regulus said simply. They sat next to each other on the couch. He was going to pull his arm away, but she leaned heavily into his side the moment they were sitting down.

“I didn’t think she would actually manage it,” she said. There were tears on her face now, but her expression was blank. “She never has before.”

“I’m sorry,” he said because he didn’t want to comment on Lavender’s ability to kiss any of her past love interests.

Parvati shrugged, but a tiny sob came out of her mouth when she went to speak. Regulus squeezed her a little closer, and she fully turned against his chest, falling to pieces in his arms without another word. She was hiccuping while she cried like she was struggling to catch her breath.

“I didn’t know that I would feel like this,” she said through the sobs.

“I know,” Regulus said. “Does Lavender know?” He was pretty sure that he already knew the answer, but he asked it anyway.

“Oh, Morgana! I hope not!” Parvati said. “I would be so humiliated.”

Regulus nodded. He wasn’t sure what else there was to say. He did wonder if maybe Lavender felt the same way, but given the way she had been attached to Ron’s face, he would guess that that ship had sailed — at least for now. Instead of speaking, he just waited out the storm of Parvati’s emotions as she weathered them. A few people passed by them, but no one spoke to them.

“I think I’m going to go to bed,” Parvati said when she’d finally calmed down. “Thank you, Regulus, but please, don’t tell anyone about this.”

“I would never do that,” Regulus said seriously. She gave him a small, wobbly smile and left.

Poor Parvati. He thought as he walked up to the dorm room. *Poor Hermione.* Despite it all, he couldn’t help thinking about Draco who had an insurmountable pressure on his shoulders while his peers were discovering something so normal as heartbreak.

the scheme.

When Regulus spent the evening comforting Parvati, he'd expected the worst consequence to be some tear stains on his jumper. He was just helping a friend through a hard time, there wasn't anything going on, not that anyone else saw it that way.

He woke relatively early in the morning and walked groggily to breakfast, barely awake as he put one foot in front of the other. He wasn't focused on what was going on around him, even as he entered the Great Hall. Vaguely he realized that the Great Hall was suspiciously quiet when he entered despite the amount of students that inhabited it, but he figured it was just because it was early. However, as he took his seat at the table, it was to find himself the focus of more than a few groups of gossiping girls.

He started eating slowly, hoping that it would go away if he ignored it, but if anything, the attention only continued to grow.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, leaning over slightly as if he was sharing a secret.

He'd walked down with Regulus after seeing him get out of bed though he looked like he was barely awake. He usually slept late the day after a Quidditch match, but Regulus appreciated the company nonetheless. Ron wasn't awake yet when they left, Regulus didn't know when he'd come back to the dorm and he very much didn't want to know, but he was sure that it was late. He already feared the stories Lavender would tell about her and Ron.

Hermione wasn't up either when they headed down to the common room. According to Harry, she'd attacked Ron with a modified transfiguration spell when she spotted him and Lavender, before sprinting up to her room. It was a hard night for a lot of them. So it was just he and Harry heading to breakfast that early, and though Harry was notoriously unobservant, even he could feel the stares and hear the burgeoning whispers.

"I don't know," Regulus said slowly, eyeing everyone curiously. A few people looked away when Regulus made eye contact with them, but some just stared back brazenly. He looked around their table and noticed Ginny sitting just a few feet away. She had one elbow propped up on the table and was resting her head on her hand. She looked like she was a second away from dropping face-first into her cereal. "Er, Ginny, what's going on?"

"Huh?" she asked, blinking blearily. "Oh, everyone is excited that you finally got a new girlfriend." She waved her hand around like this was already old news to her, her eyes already sliding closed.

"What?" Regulus and Harry said at the same time.

"What girlfriend?" Harry demanded. "I thought —" he said too loudly, before lowering his voice to say, "I thought you were, you know, *gay*."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Yes, thank you," Regulus whispered to Harry who blushed slightly. "I don't have a girlfriend," he said to Ginny.

She furrowed her eyebrows as her eyes squinted open. “Fine, then your new snogging partner who happens to be a girl,” she said sarcastically. How she could manage to be sarcastic when she was half asleep, Regulus couldn't fathom.

“Excuse me?” he asked — mostly because it was too early to say *what the fuck are you talking about* ?

“He’s a little slow, isn’t he?” she leaned forward in her seat to say to Harry.

“I don’t know,” Harry said dumbly, then turned his questioning eyes on Regulus. “Who were you snogging?” He said it accusatorially and Regulus’s mouth dropped open for a second before he could reply.

“No one,” Regulus said, a little panicked, a nervous laugh escaping him. “I haven’t snogged anyone since — well, it’s not important.”

“Since my dad?” Harry whispered.

“Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “I was just asking. *Merlin* ,” he said exasperatedly, turning to pile more eggs onto his plate. He'd already devoured his first serving. Regulus felt oddly grateful that he had such an appetite, though he still hadn’t gained all the weight back that he’d lost over the summer. “Maybe someone is just spreading a rumor about you.”

“Why?” Regulus asked.

Harry shrugged again. “Lots of girls want to date you, they keep asking me if you’re single.”

“I’m sorry?” Regulus’s voice was growing in pitch alarmingly. “When did this happen?”

“It’s been happening for weeks. I just told them you weren’t interested, since I assumed you weren’t. I mean, you’re like... an adult, or whatever. It would be pretty weird for you to date someone. Unless you want to?” He was giving him a suspicious look that he did not appreciate.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Regulus hissed. “No, I’m definitely not interested in anyone, I just hadn’t realized that was happening. Why didn’t you mention it?”

Harry shrugged for a third time — he was going to get sore at this rate — and stuffed a huge bite of scrambled eggs into his mouth.

Regulus turned back to Ginny. “Who are people saying I’m snogging?”

Ginny took a huge gulp of tea and swallowed in a way that looked painful. “Parvati, of course. Here she comes now.” She nodded toward the Great Hall door and Regulus turned just in time to see Parvati half skip over to him and sit so close beside him that they could have been glued together.

“Good morning,” she said and kissed him on the cheek.

“Umm,” Regulus said loudly.

“Just go with it,” Parvati whispered pleadingly. Regulus looked helplessly at Harry who was watching them bewilderedly. “Please.” Her panicked eyes flickered to the door where Ron and Lavender entered hand in hand. Lavender was talking at a rapid-fire rate and Ron was nodding along, looking very dazed. His red hair was sticking out at odd angles and Regulus wondered if Lavender had gone to their dorm just to wake him.

“Oh, I am so not doing this,” Regulus said, reality finally dawning on him.

“Please,” Parvati whispered. “She can’t know how I feel and I told her you were my crush, even though — no offense — I’m really not interested in you. If she thinks we both succeeded last night then she won’t get suspicious.”

Succeeded , Regulus repeated with an unsettled shiver. He didn’t like the sound of that.

Regulus was shaking his head the whole time she was speaking, but when Ron and Lavender sat across from them, he couldn’t bring himself to do much but give a forced smile. Ron looked confused, but Lavender just gave him a wide grin. She looked so genuinely pleased that Regulus felt guilty about just about everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

Regulus didn’t think he could bear to stay in the Great Hall for another second with the number of eyes on him, the whispers had grown significantly since Parvati entered. How did she even have time to spread this around?

He quickly stuffed a piece of toast into his mouth and gave Parvati a look before leaving the Hall. She was quick to follow him as he hurried outside, through the entrance hall and outside to the Viaduct Courtyard. It was ice cold when he left the castle, the windchill cutting through his thin jumper. He found the cold invigorating though and it helped to clear his head.

“Where are you going?” Parvati asked, her voice taking on a shrill factor when the cold touched her skin. “Oh, it’s so cold. Why do we have to be out here?”

“Because I know no one else will follow us,” he said. His teeth were starting to chatter and he threw a quick warming charm over both of them. It didn’t do much though against the bitter cold. “This is a bad idea.”

“Yes, we’re going to freeze to death.”

“No, Parvati.”

She groaned. “Listen it’s not forever, just until Christmas or something. A month, that’s it. I promise it won’t be any trouble and this will hopefully get those other girls to leave you alone.”

“What other girls?”

Parvati threw her hands out in front of her. “The ones that keep — it doesn’t matter. I assumed you weren’t interested in them, you never gave them any attention.”

“Yes, ‘cause I’m gay!” He fluttered his hands around helplessly as he said.

“Really?” she asked, looking shocked.

“I went to the Yule Ball with a boy, I thought it was obvious.”

“Well, you could be bisexual,” she said keenly.

“I’m not,” he said dryly.

“Fine. I’m not either. Bisexual that is. At least, I don’t think so. I was thinking about it last night and I don’t think I’ve ever liked a boy the way I liked La—a girl.”

He gave a put-upon sigh. “Parvati, as much as I’m happy for you with your newfound sexuality, this is not a good idea. Ron is going to know it’s fake and he’s going to tell Lavender. It’s a terrible plan.”

“How is Ron going to know?” she asked.

Regulus didn’t feel like explaining, more than enough people knew his secret and he didn’t need to add to it. Plus it felt like it was the wrong time to unpack his needlessly complicated past. “He just will.”

She frowned deeply, it almost looked like a pout. “Please, just for a few weeks.”

He was shaking his head while she spoke. “What are you even hoping to get out of this?”

“Lavender asked where I went last night and she sounded suspicious!”

“I highly doubt that.”

“And I can’t just listen to her talk about *Ron*,” she snarled his name. “That big dumb oaf.”

“All right,” Regulus said chastisingly. “Ron hasn’t actually done anything wrong here, you know that, don’t you?”

“Whatever!” she shouted. “I just can’t listen to her brag when she knows I’m sad and alone.”

“Lots of people aren’t in relationships,” Regulus said evenly. “It doesn’t make them sad and alone.” He did his best to ignore the small stab of offense he felt at her choice of words.

“But we were going to be in one together.” Her cheeks turned very red. “I mean, not *together*, but at the same time. If I don’t also have a boyfriend, then she’s going to think I’m pathetic.”

“She’s your friend. She’s not going to think you’re pathetic.”

Parvati looked away, tears forming in her eyes. “You don’t know that.”

Regulus was sure that he did know it, even if Lavender could be overbearing, she loved her friends fiercely. He huffed and squeezed his eyes closed. *Salazar, help him*. “Okay, fine.”

Parvati's mouth dropped open in excitement. "Just till Christmas!"

"Yes! I knew you'd agree. Okay, so here is the plan."

Regulus was at the end of his rope after his morning with Parvati, especially given the way people kept watching them, Ron especially who looked like he very much wanted an explanation for what was going on, so he'd escaped down to the boathouse. Harry had been quick to follow him. Regulus was both relieved and overwhelmed to see him coming, he didn't want Harry to be upset with him and the sooner he could explain the better, but he still felt overburdened by the day's events. The walk to the boathouse was just as miserable as he expected it to be, and it was so long that his legs burned with exhaustion and pain, but it was enough to clear his head a bit.

"So you're pretend-dating Parvati because Lavender is actually-dating Ron, and Parvati doesn't want Lavender to think she's sad because she's alone?" Harry asked later that afternoon. Regulus had kept Parvati's feelings for Lavender out of his explanation; he wouldn't reveal those to anyone without her permission.

"Yes, that's the general idea."

"Parvati doesn't know about you, right?" Harry asked. He grabbed a stone that was sitting right on the end of the boathouse and tossed it out onto the water. It skipped twice before crashing through the surface with a loud *thunk*.

"No, I've thought about telling them, but I never got around to it. I'm not sure that I want anyone else to know."

"Ron is going to be suspicious," Harry said, giving him a sideways look.

"I know," Regulus said with a tired sigh. "But it's not like I can tell him. Ron is a trustworthy friend, but that kind of gossip is bound to get back to Lavender if I tell Ron."

"So you're just going to let him believe that you're dating Parvati?"

"No," Regulus said. "That would be too weird." He bit the inside of his cheek roughly, the sharp pain just enough to silence the loud, panicked thoughts screaming in the back of his head. "You said that girls have been approaching you about asking me out?"

"Yeah, but I don't want you to date any of them either," Harry joked, although there was genuine worry in his eyes that Regulus didn't understand.

Regulus chuckled. "Maybe I'll use them as an excuse. If people think I'm dating Parvati then maybe they won't try to ask me out."

"You didn't even know about them till this morning," Harry said.

"Ron doesn't need to know that."

“But he’s still going to know it’s fake, at least on your end, what if he tells Lavender that?” Harry asked.

Regulus groaned. “I don’t know,” he said frustratingly. “But I already told Parvati I would help so I have to think of something.”

“How long are you going to do this for? I mean, what if Lavender and Ron get married or something? Are you still going to be fake-dating Parvati then?”

Regulus laughed loudly, it was strained and off-sounding, the stress seeping in. “It ends at Christmas,” he said, his laughs quieting to a worried snicker.

Harry pursed his lips unhappily for a moment. “What are you going to tell Hermione?” Harry asked.

Regulus groaned. “The same thing,” he answered though he knew Hermione would be even more suspicious than Ron was bound to be. He would have to tell Luna too when he got the chance.

“Hermione’s going to see right through you,” Harry muttered. Regulus quietly agreed, but he was hoping he could avoid it all for now. He frowned again and Regulus could see his mind turning over as he worried about something.

“What is it? Do you not want me to do this?” Though this plan didn’t involve or affect Harry in any real way, he still was unwilling to go through with it if it was going to bother Harry that much.

Harry looked at him out of the corner of his eye for a second before looking away, gazing out over the Black Lake. “Whenever you and my dad... dated,” he said the word as if it eluded him, “did anyone else know?”

“No,” Regulus said simply, not even his own friends were aware, not until long after James had broken up with him. “Why?”

Harry shrugged. “I was just wondering,” he said softly. “Did you ever think about telling Sirius?”

Regulus swallowed. “No, Sirius and I weren’t speaking when James and I were together. We didn’t really speak again until after he escaped Azkaban, and I don’t see the point in telling him now.” Quietly he thought that Sirius would hate him when he found out, or that he would find a way to blame him for James’s and Lily’s deaths.

“I don’t understand how you could have gone so long without speaking to your brother,” Harry said.

Regulus sighed softly, his chest ached slightly as he thought of those long years alone. “I wasn’t the same as I am now during my first life. I wasn’t a good brother,” he admitted. “I wasn’t a good person. Sirius was right not to speak to me.”

“If you weren’t a good person, then why did my dad date you?”

“Because he thought he could save me, I think,” Regulus said honestly. He’d never expected Harry to ask, but he wouldn’t deny him secrets about his father, especially since they would never meet. “He convinced himself that I wasn’t as bad as Sirius thought, but in the end, he realized who I was.”

Harry, surprisingly, looked angry. “He was wrong,” he said sternly.

“What?” Regulus asked, shocked.

“You’re not a bad person. If he told you that, then he’s... a dickhead,” he spat the word.

Regulus let out a laugh against his will. “He wasn’t a dickhead. I’ve changed a lot since then.” Though he still didn’t think he was exactly a good person, the things he did to Katie and Rosmerta came to mind.

“I don’t think a bad person would have tried to keep me safe, no matter how much they changed. And you saved your brother, even though he refused to talk to you for years. I think you’re a good person.”

Regulus smiled, oddly touched by the ferocity with which Harry spoke. “Thanks, Harry,” he said. “You really shouldn’t blame your dad though. He was just doing what he thought was right. Besides, we were never going to end up together.”

It was as if his brain was set on torturing him that day, because the memory of James telling him about Lily’s complementary patronus, and the undying love he felt for her, swam to the front of his mind. He didn’t outwardly react to it, but he felt short of breath for a moment.

“I guess,” Harry mumbled. He said nothing further, and Regulus felt incapable of continuing the conversation.

Fake dating Parvati was easier than he had expected it to be. They were already friends, so they mostly just spent time together with Ron and Lavender. Of course, Ron and Lavender were more interested in snogging than talking, so there wasn’t much for him and Parvati to do beyond completing classwork or playing Exploding Snap. More than anything, his job was just to distract Parvati when she started glaring at Ron and Lavender so hard that he worried they might burst into flames.

Ron was deeply confused by it all, but when Regulus repeated to him how important it was that Lavender *never* found out what was going on with her friend, Ron finally agreed not to tell her. If anything he just seemed overwhelmed by Lavender's new place in his life.

Hermione was, as suspected, very suspicious, but she was upset enough at Ron that it didn’t matter much. She avoided him like he had Spattergroit and would spend most of her free time in the library. Regulus joined her sometimes, but mostly it was Harry who went. Regulus was pretty sure he was also leaving because then Hermione would be forced to listen to him rant about Draco, and Regulus wouldn’t be there to stop him.

Despite the fight they'd had at the beginning of the year, Harry was still consumed with the comings and goings of Draco Malfoy. He would stay up late into the evening watching Draco's name on the Marauder's Map, though he would hide the map when he noticed Regulus watching him. He would also talk about it to Ron and Hermione when he thought Regulus couldn't hear him. And anytime Draco was in the room, Harry was watching him.

"It's weird that he's not on the Quidditch team anymore. Their new seeker is terrible. Why do you think he dropped out?"

"Maybe he just didn't have the time with all his O.W.L.s." Harry gave him a suspicious look. "I don't know, Harry. There could be any reason."

"I guess," Harry said, though he sounded very unsatisfied.

Regulus could only hope that their fight had stopped Harry from doing anything rash. It was bad enough that Draco was making dangerous decisions in his free time. Though he'd fix everything with Katie Bell and Rosmerta, he and Draco still hadn't gotten the chance to speak. Draco was no doubt avoiding him, though Regulus did understand why, but it was frustrating to feel so helpless. Especially as Draco grew thinner and paler as the year stretched on.

By December, Draco had all but given up on casting a glamour over it. He could only hope that his Christmas holidays back at Malfoy Manor wouldn't end in something terrible. The longer things went without a solution, the more anxious Regulus felt. He thought about going to Dumbledore more than a few times, but he didn't want to put Draco in a position where he had to choose between his parents' safety and his own. At least, not yet.

the horcrux.

Chapter Notes

first of all, this is a double upload so make sure you've read 99 before you read 100.

second of all, it is the one year anniversary of when i started posting this fic. i can't believe that it's gained so much attention in only a year, but i'm so happy that it has. i posted so much last week because i really wanted to post chapter 100 for the one year, so here we are! enjoy xx

A week or so before the Christmas holidays, Harry finally brought up the invitation he'd received to Slughorn's Christmas party. He and Hermione had received them weeks before, but Harry had been avoiding the topic and Regulus wasn't interested in pushing him to talk about it.

"I guess I have to go," he said with a frown. "You said it was an unaltered memory that we needed, right? What is the memory about?"

"That's not something you need to worry about yet," Regulus said, shaking his head. "Just focus on befriending the man for now. He's easily swayed by fame, but we don't want to move too quickly and scare him off. If he cares enough about protecting this secret to give Dumbledore an altered memory, then you'll have to be careful interacting with him."

"So you're saying I should act like a Slytherin?" Harry asked knowingly.

"Yes," Regulus answered honestly. "Any Gryffindor tendencies you have, try to bury them. This isn't like fighting magical creatures, you need to be clever. Don't bring up anything to do with the Dark Lord."

"Okay," Harry said. "Do you think I need to bring someone to this event?"

"You might as well. It'll be expected. Who are you going to ask?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably Hermione. She was going to go with Ron but I guess that's not happening now. It makes the most sense for us to go together."

"Good idea," Regulus said with a smile. Unfortunately, that plan fell through only three days before the event.

"She already invited someone else, she told me to just choose someone. Do you want to go?"

Regulus gave him a questioning look. "I can go, but who is Hermione going with?"

“I don’t know,” Harry said, although he looked unsettled.

“You’re sure there isn’t anyone else you want to ask?” Regulus asked the question blandly, but he couldn’t deny that he had been curious. Harry hadn’t expressed interest in anyone, at least not to his friends, but he always held those kinds of feelings close to his chest.

Harry gave a half-hearted shrug. “My back up plan was to ask Luna ‘cause I know she won’t try to slip me a love potion.”

Regulus smiled despite himself. “Yes, very true. Okay, I’ll go with you. It might help if I can see you and Slughorn interact.”

By the time they arrived for Slughorn’s party a few nights later, Hermione had already taken the initiative of telling the whole school — and specifically Ron — that she was taking McLaggen to Slughorn’s party. Regulus was seconds away from banging his head repeatedly on the table as he watched Hermione grin madly while she told Lavender and Parvati that she had a thing for *really good Quidditch players*. He had to hand it to her, she knew her target audience, Ron’s attention was locked on her the moment she said it.

“Does Hermione like Ron?” Parvati whispered right after Hermione left, her eyes lit up with the prospect of fresh gossip. He should have been glad that she didn’t look forlorn like she usually did, but he also couldn’t betray Hermione, even if her feelings were fairly obvious to anyone who wasn’t Ron.

“I don’t know,” he said, though it was probably obvious that he was lying.

Regulus dressed nicely to go to Slughorn’s party — a classic black wizard robe that was perfectly tailored. Harry was dressed the same, though his robe was a dark green. They hadn’t brought them this year, as Regulus hadn’t been expecting any sort of major event that would require formalwear, so he’d had to call Sirius on the mirror to get him to owl the robes to them.

“What do you need wizarding robes for?” he asked suspiciously. He was giving Regulus a look that he couldn’t decipher. He could tell that there was something wrong though, and he wondered if something was going on with Remus again.

“Sluggy’s Christmas party, Harry needs to go and I’m going with him,” Regulus explained simply, brushing it off like it didn’t matter.

Sirius narrowed his eyes. “Fine,” he said, disappearing from the mirror a second later without so much as a goodbye.

“Rude,” Regulus mumbled.

Regardless, Sirius sent the robes the next day. Dean was also invited to the party as Ginny’s date, though he was dressed in a muggle suit that looked very out of place in their red and gold dorm room. Ron was watching them get ready with purely disguised jealousy.

“I thought you said that Slughorn was a creep,” Ron mumbled.

“He is,” Regulus said. “But he’s a necessary creep at the moment, so we have to play by his rules.”

Seamus entered right as Regulus finished speaking and eyed Dean with mirth. “You look ridiculous,” he said jokingly, but there was something in his eyes, a little crack of irritation.

Dean grinned. “You’re just jealous that you didn’t get invited,” he said with fake smugness.

Seamus laughed, but it sounded a little strained. “Totally,” he said, throwing himself onto his bed and closing his curtains without another word. Dean furrowed his eyebrows slightly but turned away without saying anything.

The party itself was just as gaudy and over-the-top as Regulus had expected it to be. It was in Slughorn’s office — a different one than the one he’d occupied during Regulus’s first life, this one was much bigger — but the place was packed. The ceilings and walls were adorned with richly colored greens, reds, and golds, curtains and rugs were hanging wherever he looked.

The room was hot and stuffy, and Regulus immediately felt sweat spring up on his forehead. There was music playing, but Regulus couldn’t tell if it was someone actually singing or if it was just a record, the room was too cramped to see properly.

“Harry, m’boy!” Slughorn shouted, clapping Harry on the back the moment he spotted him. “And you’ve brought Regulus Black. What a surprise.” He sounded like he would have rather Harry had brought the Dark Lord himself, but at least he didn’t say it out loud. Harry gave him his best over-the-top schmoozing reply — Regulus’s mother would have been proud.

They mingled for a bit with the other guests after Slughorn left them. Harry tried to follow him at first, but Regulus stopped him, it wouldn’t do to crowd the man at his own party. Right now they were just trying to blend in. There were other students in attendance — Ginny and Dean, Hermione and McLaggen, Draco and Daphne Greengrass — but the party was mostly full of accomplished adults. Harry was a prime target for a lot of them, and even Regulus had more than one person come over to speak with him, mostly to congratulate him on his father’s semi-recent acquittal.

The most uncomfortable guest they ran into was Sanguini the vampire. He was intimidating, a strong aura of discomfort flowed around him that put Regulus instantly on edge. He was also disturbingly handsome, tall with perfectly styled dark hair and piercing eyes that were difficult to look away from. Regulus greeted him politely, but Sanguini didn’t reply right away, only tilted his head, a curious tug to his lips.

After a few minutes of Harry and Worple, the man who’d brought Sanguini to the party, talking, before Sanguini leaned down so that his mouth was next to Regulus’s ear.

“You have such a peculiar smell,” he purred. Regulus tensed, frozen like an animal in a trap, while a flood of truly humiliating arousal washed through him.

“How so?” he responded quietly.

“Almost like...” he leaned just a bit closer and brushed his lips against the skin of Regulus’s neck. Regulus’s eyes fluttered closed without his permission.

“Sanguini!” Worple snapped. Sanguini pulled back to look at him.

“Yes?” he asked softly, seemingly unbothered by his friend’s disapproval.

Regulus, for his part, needed to escape that conversation as quickly as possible, and when he noticed Snape watching him and Sanguini with poorly disguised disgust, a deep frown on his lips, he decided that was as good of an excuse as any.

“Excuse me,” Regulus said quickly, hoping his face wasn’t too red. He could feel Sanguini’s eyes on him as he left, but he was careful not to make eye contact. He did not need to be sucked in by an attractive vampire. He had more than enough problems as it was.

“I need to speak with you,” Snape said once Regulus was in front of him. Regulus looked at him surprised, he’d just been walking over to get away from Sanguini, and he hadn’t realized that Snape was there for a reason.

“Okay,” he said. Snape nodded toward the door, and Regulus looked back at Harry just long enough to see him going over to talk to Hermione before following Snape out into the corridor. They went farther than he expected to go, Snape was walking quickly, his steps stiff while his cloak billowed behind him. Regulus had to hurry to keep up with him.

They ended up in a secluded courtyard a few floors down from Slughorn’s office, it was a part of the castle that Regulus hadn’t ever been to. It still surprised him the way the castle could hold such secrets despite him having spent so much time inside its walls.

“What is it?” Regulus asked. Snape was looking at the sky. It was a cloudy night, not a star in sight, and Regulus wondered if it would begin to snow again soon. The ground was still frozen, a thick layer of snow permanently decorating every available surface.

Snape sighed and turned to look at him, then moved to sit on one of the stone benches that was under the covered corridor next to the courtyard. Regulus’s nerves grew, something was wrong. He’d never seen Snape look so nervous. Snape reached into his cloak pocket and withdrew a flask, taking a quick swig from it.

“I need to tell you something,” Snape said rigidly. “Don’t interrupt.”

“All right,” Regulus said curiously. He leaned against the wall so that he was facing Snape. Snape’s face was carefully blank, Regulus could practically see the Occlumency wall that he’d put up between them.

“Shortly before Harry Potter was born, I overheard Trelawney deliver a prophecy to Dumbledore. You’ve heard the prophecy?” Regulus nodded once, his heart already racing. “I overheard it and I was desperate to move up in the Death Eater ranks. I’m a half-blood and I had no money. Beyond my usefulness with potions, there wasn’t much I could offer the Dark Lord, not until I heard the prophecy.”

“You gave him the prophecy?” Regulus gasped.

Snape gave him a sharp look that clearly meant ‘don’t *interrupt* .’ “I did. I did not know he would take it to mean Lily’s son, and by the time he did, it was too late to save them. I tried to convince Dumbledore to hide them, but he let James Potter choose who their secret keeper was and Pettigrew used his first available moment to betray them to the Dark Lord.”

Regulus tried to swallow, but it felt like someone was gripping his throat so tightly that he couldn’t breathe.

“After L—Lily died and the Dark Lord fell, Dumbledore offered me protection if I continued to work for him. He made me promise to protect Lily’s son, and though I dislike him severely, I have endeavored to do so. But—”

“But?” Regulus asked. His voice was stale like he wasn’t wholly in his body. He couldn’t feel anything beyond a vague squeezing sensation like he was being forcibly shrunk with magic.

“Something has changed,” Snape said. He looked at Regulus with something that Regulus never would have expected to see on Snape’s face: desperation.

“What is it?” Regulus said. He was lightheaded.

“I am loyal to Dumbledore,” Snape said. “But I do not always agree with him. He makes choices that no one else could make, and if you were not here, I would have no other option, but Lily — Lily would never forgive me if I don’t try.”

“Just tell me what’s going on!” Regulus snapped suddenly, the stagnant adrenaline making him feel sick and dizzy.

“You know of the Horcruxes?” Regulus gave a tense nod, but there was something inside him, something dawning before he could articulate it. “When the Dark Lord attempted to kill Harry Potter after Lily died for him, it backfired, he was destroyed by his own spell, but he was prepared to make another Horcrux, his soul had already split when he killed Lily.”

“No,” Regulus breathed. “Don’t say it.” If it was never said out loud, then it wasn’t real, it couldn’t be.

Snape went on as if he hadn’t heard him, but he was frowning sympathetically. “The broken piece of his soul attached to the only living thing in the room.”

“Please stop,” Regulus begged, his knees gave out and he slowly slid down the wall to the floor.

“Harry is a Horcrux. In order for the Dark Lord to be destroyed, Harry must die and the Dark Lord himself must do it.”

Regulus was an exploding star collapsing in on itself, every thought like a burst of light and energy tearing through space and destroying everything in its path. Somewhere, distantly, he felt Snape shove his flask into his hand and help him drink from it. It tasted like some abominable mixture of calming draught and firewhiskey. It wasn’t safe to mix calming

draught with alcohol, but as it rushed through his veins, he felt his soul return to his shaking body. *Not Harry, not Harry, not his Harry.*

“Why do you call him that?” Snape asked suddenly.

Regulus looked up at him confused, he was crouching in front of where Regulus was curled in a tight ball against the wall. “What?”

“ *Your* Harry.”

Regulus hadn’t realized that he was saying that bit out loud. “I don’t know,” he mumbled. “Why did you tell me this? How did you know?”

“Dumbledore told me.” Regulus already knew that would be the answer, but it still felt like being stabbed to hear it confirmed. “But if you can save Harry…”

“You don’t believe that Dumbledore wants to save him?” Regulus asked.

“I think Dumbledore cares for Harry in his own way,” Snape said, though his frown deepened as he spoke, “but he is running out of time.”

“How long has he known?”

“That I don’t know,” Snape said.

“He’s so young,” Regulus whispered pleadingly. “He’s barely gotten a chance to live yet.”

Snape said nothing, only watching him for a long moment.

“How can Dumbledore be okay with this?”

“He is prepared to make sacrifices for the greater good, even if Harry is the one to pay.” He paused for a moment, before asking, “Wouldn’t you make the sacrifice? If it was any other child?”

Regulus clenched his teeth. He thought unwillingly about Hermione who had worked so hard to find acceptance and success in the wizarding world, Ron who, despite his flaws, had always loved his friends, Parvati and Lavender, who had barely had the chance to find themselves. He thought of Luna and the gentleness with which she moved through the world, Neville and his great courage, Theo and his desperation to survive. He thought of Draco who existed with the weight of a madman’s expectations on his shoulders. He couldn’t let go of any of them any more than he could let go of Harry.

“Would I know the other kid?” he asked.

Snape’s lips quirked into a smile. Regulus nearly smiled back, but the pain of what he’d just learned made it impossible.

“I won’t let him kill Harry,” Regulus said.

Snape raised his eyebrows slightly, but he didn't look fully surprised.

"Even if it means that the Dark Lord will never die?"

Regulus shut every thought of fear out of his head, every voice screaming at him, he blocked out it all. "Even then."

He drank down a few more large swigs from Snape's flask before heading back to the party. Harry and Hermione found him instantly and wanted to leave. He was more than happy to oblige. Neither of them spoke to him much, they seemed to understand that he didn't feel like talking, but he did notice Harry shooting him concerned looks. Regulus avoided looking directly at him like one might avoid staring at the sun, it burned his eyes to think of Harry at the moment, he couldn't bear to see him.

He didn't sleep that night, staying up late into the evening as he waited for the sun to rise. Somewhere outside of himself, he could hear the distant noises of panic, pain, and sorrow rising up like a war cry, but he remained still and silent. As the sun rose and the first dances of red light blazed into the dorm room, Regulus rose from his bed and packed his things. Afterward, he walked slowly through the silent castle, snow was falling outside and Regulus could hear it muffled like wool.

He arrived at Dumbledore's office and gave the last password that he'd been told, only to receive a prompt dismissal when the statue refused to move aside. He turned on his heel, his emotions still buried so deep inside him that he was an empty husk moving of its own volition.

"Where were you?" Harry asked when he reentered the common room. He looked worried, a deep line between his eyebrows. Regulus avoided looking at his eyes directly. Lily's eyes. Would she be angry with Regulus that he had not discovered this grave secret earlier?

"Can I borrow the map?" Regulus asked, his voice was dead even to his own ears.

"Er, yeah, I suppose," Harry said. He had to dig it out of his trunk, but he did so quickly and handed it to Regulus without another question.

Regulus sat down on the foot of his bed and searched the map quickly.

"Who are you looking for?" Harry asked finally, but Regulus had already found what he needed to find. Dumbledore was nowhere in the castle, nowhere to be found.

"No one," he said, handing back the map without an explanation.

The journey back to London happened in a daze. Hermione was supposed to come to visit them for Christmas, but when she realized Ron would be there, she abandoned the idea completely. Harry seemed very upset by this, but he didn't argue with her. Regulus had originally planned to orchestrate his breakup from Parvati on the train, but he didn't feel much like doing it anymore.

He spoke to no one, watching the world slide past outside the windows, and waited. He knew that he would crack open eventually, that this unnatural calm couldn't last forever, but there wasn't much to do beyond wait. Luna sat next to him, squeezed up against his side. He hadn't spent much time with her that year, and he suddenly felt a lot of regret about that. She'd already expressed that she felt friendless and he'd failed her.

She looked tired he realized and about halfway through the train ride, she rested her head against his shoulder and fell asleep. Parvati sat across from them, she was pretending to read, but she kept looking toward the glass door as if Ron and Lavender might walk by. They were in their own compartment, Lavender had insisted, and Regulus hadn't seen them since that morning.

Harry and Hermione sat next to each other, but both of them were just as silent as everyone else. Harry had a thoughtful look on his face, but Regulus didn't know why. He wondered if something had happened while he was away from Harry during the party. Surely if he got into a fight with Draco, Regulus would have heard about it by now.

They disembarked from the train quickly, waving to their friends and heading a few feet away so that they could apparate safely. Once he was sure they had everything, both Nyx's and Hedwig's cages emptied, shrunk, and placed in their pockets, Regulus grabbed Harry's arm and apparated them back to the front steps of Grimmauld. He could have apparated them inside, the wards would have let him, but it was physically and magically taxing to come through wards that strong, especially while side-alonging another person. He wasn't willing to risk it when his focus wasn't all there.

"Can we talk?" Harry said quietly. "When we get inside? It's important."

Regulus felt like his stomach had dropped out from inside him, but there was no way that Harry could know what he knew. He nodded. "Yes, of course."

Harry looked slightly relieved, his shoulders loosening. They walked into Grimmauld together but stopped the moment they passed the threshold of the front door. Regulus already felt off, consumed by numbness in a way he had never been, but the energy inside Grimmauld was so odd that it made him feel unbalanced.

Remus was waiting for them, near the doorway to the living room. "Hey boys, come in here."

Harry gave Regulus a look, and though Regulus wanted to give him a look back, he couldn't bear to look in his eyes, so he marched forward without so much as a frown. The living room looked just as it had before they left for school, except Remus was standing awkwardly behind the couch that Sirius was sitting on, his arms crossed tightly over his chest.

"Is something wrong?" Harry asked. Sirius had a very odd look on his face, his cheek was twitching and his eyes were shooting back and forth from Harry's face to Regulus's like he couldn't decide who he needed to address first.

"Nothing's wrong. Why don't you both sit down?" Remus asked.

Harry sat down immediately, but Regulus felt locked in place. He didn't think he would survive any more bad news. Remus watched him for a moment like he thought he'd give in, but Sirius was glaring. His eyes were bright with intensity, the gray nearly translucent. Regulus stared him down, unable to look away and unwilling to blink first.

"Fine," Remus said, finally drawing Regulus's attention away from his brother. "Something has happened. Nothing bad, so I don't want either of you to overreact."

"Overreact?" Harry asked, he sounded anxious. Regulus felt mildly sick.

Remus looked at Sirius, but Sirius was still staring at Regulus. Remus gave a very quiet sigh. "Okay, you can come in here," he shouted.

Harry straightened up in his seat. Regulus could see him looking between the three of them, but Regulus was sure his face was stark white. He didn't know what was going on any more than Harry did. His heart was pounding so loud that he could hear it in his ears, his nails dug into the skin of his palms painfully, but he couldn't bring himself to stop.

He heard the floor creak as someone came into the living room, and he looked just after Harry gasped, his body moving slowly even as his panic swelled like a huge wave. When he saw who was standing in the doorway, he thought he might black out for a second, but then every emotion raced away from him in an instant.

It was a hallucination or a ghost just like it had been before. He didn't know what Remus was talking about, who he had been yelling to, but it wasn't the person in front of him. Regulus was used to this song and dance, he knew how to pretend that no one was there when the love of his life was standing right in front of him.

He swallowed — or tried to, his mouth was unusually dry — and turned to look at the others. He was going to ask who Remus was yelling at, but Harry's face caught his eye. He'd stood from the chair he was sitting in. His mouth was hanging open, his green eyes bulging, and his body was so still that he looked like he wasn't breathing.

"Harry," James whispered.

Harry's face somehow grew even more shocked as he breathed, "Dad?"

Regulus's head snapped around to look at James. James who had just spoken to Harry. Harry had heard him. He'd heard James. James was...

James was looking at Harry, tears filling his eyes, but then he blinked and his eyes shifted over to Regulus. Later, Regulus would say that he had no idea why he reacted as he did, that he had no memory of that night, but that would be a lie.

Every moment of longing, regret, pain, and love all boiled up inside him, spreading over his skin like acid and filling his lungs with stones. James was *alive* and Regulus loved him, and he was so, so incapable of dealing with any of it.

James didn't even get a second to blink before Regulus turned on his heel and vanished from Grimmauld in an instant.

the arrival part II.

“James,” Remus said. James couldn’t see him or Sirius, not really, he could only make out the shape of them, yet he knew it was them, he knew in his bones that these were his people, his friends, his family.

He opened his mouth to say something and instead let out a wretched sob. He tried to take a step forward, but his legs shook too badly. He felt like a newborn deer desperately trying to crawl to its mother.

“James,” Sirius said softly. He’d been so suspicious a moment ago, but with Remus here, it was like he was free to believe what was in front of him. Sirius practically ran to him, taking a few steps in long strides, and James was in his arms before he hit the ground, his shaking legs finally giving out. “How? How are you here? Remus, how is he here?”

“I don’t know,” Remus said, sounding dazed.

Sirius slowly lowered James to the ground, but James was barely aware of it. He was taking deep breaths in through his nose, taking in the smell of Sirius around him, of Remus right behind him. It was so familiar, all that time and they still smelled the same. It was them. He wasn’t alone, he wasn’t trapped, he was with his friends. That was all that mattered.

“Don’t let them take me back,” he begged shortly before losing track of himself. He didn’t fall into unconsciousness, but he was crying uncontrollably, and he was pretty sure that he kept begging, the words tumbling out of his mouth without his permission.

Sirius and Remus were the only concrete things around him, even his own body was without form. It was just a beacon of pain, a shrine to the suffering he’d endured. His friends kept trying to talk to him, but he was incapable of replying. At one point Sirius tried to help him up and accidentally touched the skin of his forearm when his sleeve was pushed up slightly, and the skin-on-skin contact caused him to cry out in so much pain that Sirius dropped him altogether.

“What was that?” Sirius whispered. He wasn’t speaking to James, not that James could have responded if he was.

“Let me look at it again,” Remus whispered back. James let them maneuver him however they needed, all while trying to grab for them like they would disappear if he didn’t have a hand touching each of them. Sirius took his hand firmly once he realized. His skin was clammy with nervous sweat. Remus pushed back his sleeve again, being careful not to touch him there, while James reached out and clenched his fist in Remus’s cardigan.

“His skin,” Sirius gasped. “James, what happened to you?”

Don't let them take me. Don't send me back. I don't want to go back .

“I think it’s spell damage,” Remus said. “Don’t you remember when Peter tried to use cleaning spells on his socks so he could rewear them and it gave him a rash.”

Sirius’s jaw clenched, but his eyes danced back to James’s exposed arm and he nodded. “Yeah, it does look like that. What do we do?”

“I think we can get medicine for it in Diagon. You stay here, I’ll go grab some.”

NO! Don’t leave. You can’t leave.

“Okay, James. Relax, it’s okay,” Remus said, his voice taking on a twinge of panic. James could still feel words coming out of his mouth, but he couldn’t stop or understand them. “What about Kreacher?”

Sirius shook his head. “He hasn’t come back in months. I don’t know... he’s not an option.” Sirius and Remus stared at each other in silence for a second before Sirius nodded once. “James, why don’t we get you upstairs into a bath? I think some warm water will help and, no offense, but you smell weird.”

You’ll come with me .

“Yes,” Sirius said.

You both will . You can’t leave. You both have to come .

“We both will,” Remus said kindly. “Can you walk?”

James wasn’t sure what his answer was or if he followed through with the task, because the next thing he knew, he was naked and slowly sinking into warm bath water. Sirius had added some skin-soothing potion to it, but it still burned as he touched it. He hissed in pain, his eyes clenched together.

It was the first time he’d been properly bathed since he came back and the feeling of it brought instant tears to his eyes. Distantly, he was embarrassed to be naked in front of both Remus and Sirius, but they both seemed unbothered by it. James’s hands shook too badly to hold the flannel that Sirius gave him, so Sirius had to help wash him. The feel of it was so rough and uncomfortable, that James felt tears well up and slide down his face.

Sirius and Remus didn’t comment on it. He knew that he was still speaking, still mumbling things to them, but the words were getting farther apart the longer he was in the bath. There was no safety in how he felt, but there was a certain normalcy and care involved that made him feel a little more human.

“Can you go grab him some pajamas?” Sirius asked Remus. Remus nodded solemnly.

“I’ll be right back, okay?”

James only nodded. His throat hurt from all the talking he’d been doing, and as he finally fell silent, his exhaustion slowly took over. His eyelids felt heavy and he could tell that each blink was getting a little longer. He vaguely knew that Remus was taking far too long to just be

getting pajamas after he left, but James wasn't capable of questioning it any longer. He could see Sirius out of the corner of his eye, only a little blurry since he was knelt beside the bath, but he couldn't look directly at him.

Instead, he stared at his toes as they stuck up from the milky white water. He wasn't sure if it was the dirt on his body that caused the color change or if it was the potions Sirius had added to the water, but it was slowly starting to make him feel sick to see it.

"Can I get out now?" he whispered.

Sirius froze, his hand stopping mid-swipe. "Yeah, you're ready to get out?"

"Please," James said.

Sirius helped him stand and then grabbed a towel to wrap around James's shoulders. James shivered, his legs shaky. He thought he might be dreaming. How could he be here with Sirius? How could he be away from the Unspeakables? Sure, he could remember escaping the Department of Mysteries and the Ministry, but who was to say he didn't make that up? Would he blink and open his eyes to find himself back in his cell?

He thought of Tom. What had happened to him? How had he died? He felt terribly guilty about it even though he'd done nothing to cause his death and there was no way he could have escaped with him.

He was vaguely aware of Sirius helping him dress. The clothes themselves scratched against his raw skin painfully making him cry out in distress, but when Sirius stopped, he shook his head. "No, just finish. Please, quickly."

He squeezed his eyes closed and let Sirius pull the clothing up and onto his body. He pushed out a relieved breath once they were in place, no longer moving. He leaned heavily into Sirius's side as he helped him hobble to a bed.

"Whose room is this?" he asked. He meant to ask whose house it was too but the darkness that fell over the house like a cloak seemed to answer that question for him.

"It's my room," Sirius said. "My new room."

He helped James crawl up on the bed.

"Don't leave me alone."

"I won't," Sirius said.

There was one singular knock at the bedroom door just as James was lying down and he shot up in panic. His body trembled as adrenaline surged through him.

"It's okay," Sirius whispered. "It's all right. It's Remus. Come in."

The door opened to reveal Remus, a brown paper bag hanging between his hands.

“You left,” James said stupidly. He already knew that Remus wasn’t with them, though he’d been sequestering off any conscious thoughts about his absence to protect himself.

“I had to get this potion.”

“I don’t want to drink anything,” James said instantly. If this was all fake — a dream or a hallucination — then it would be the perfect opportunity to get him to drink something that would hurt him.

“It’s just to help your skin,” Remus said.

“No, I don’t want to.” He said it so fiercely that even in his half-blind state he noticed Remus flinch.

“Okay, you don’t have to drink anything. You don’t look well though. Why don’t you lay down?” Sirius said. He was standing next to the bed, and James unconsciously reached out to grab his wrist.

“You’ll stay?” he asked.

Sirius gave only a momentary pause before nodding. “I’ll stay.” He moved like he was going to back away, maybe move to the dilapidated chair in the corner.

“No, stay,” James said as he tightened his hand. Sirius’s head turned slightly as if he was looking at Remus. “You’ll both stay. You’ll be here when I wake up. You won’t let them take me back.”

The world seemed to grow fuzzy around him. Fuzzier given the way he already couldn’t see very well. He hoped he wasn’t waking up, if this was a dream, then he just wanted a little bit longer. Sirius nodded, mumbling a very quiet, “Okay.”

He moved over into the center of the bed as Sirius climbed on, refusing to let go of his wrist. It felt so real in his fingers. Remus hesitated for a second before James lifted a hand to beacon him over, and when he was within grabbing distance, he grabbed him by the front of the cardigan again and yanked him onto the bed.

He was weak, far weaker than Remus was, but he’d caught Remus by surprise. Remus tumbled into the bed and had to turn at the last second to avoid crushing both James and Sirius.

James’s body didn’t relax until both Remus and Sirius were lying beside him. Neither of them spoke, and neither did James, but the gentle sounds of their breathing finally, slowly, lulled him to sleep. He slept restlessly, falling straight into formless nightmares and waking with his heart racing.

Each time he woke he would look to his left and right rapidly to make sure that Remus and Sirius were still beside him. The first couple of times he did it, they were both still awake. They would look back at him with something like consternation.

“Are you okay?” Sirius whispered once. James just nodded and closed his eyes again.

Eventually, Sirius and Remus fell asleep as well and when he would jolt awake he would have to listen for their breathing to make sure they were still alive — that they were still real. He would let the sounds surround him each time, surrendering to the flow of their lives.

He couldn't say how long that went on. It could have been days for all he knew. A heavy black curtain fell over the window so the only light was a permanent flame on an old candle that hung near the door. The passage of time was a mystery to him. Eventually, he couldn't fall back asleep. He had to pee and the way he was tucked between his friends was starting to make him feel stiff and uncomfortable.

He moved slowly, carefully, trying not to wake either of them as he maneuvered down the center of the bed. His body felt awkward as if his limbs didn't actually belong to themselves. However, when he was halfway down the bed, Sirius shot up into a sitting position.

“James,” he gasped. Remus grunted tiredly, blinking awake. “You’re really here.” His eyes were so bright that he almost looked like they were glowing in the low light. James blinked stupidly at him.

“I think so,” James said uncertainly.

“How?” Sirius whispered. They were so close together that James actually felt like he could see the details of his face. He was so much older than the last time he'd seen him. There were lines on his face, between his eyebrows, and stretched across his forehead. They made him look permanently worried. His eyes were pleading with him, asking for an answer that James only half knew.

“I don't know,” he mumbled, then corrected, “I'm not sure.”

“I think we should talk,” Remus said. “And eat.”

Sirius nodded without looking away from James's face. His eyes were glancing around searchingly as if he was trying to memorize every detail. James wanted to feel relieved to be with Sirius, but he still felt so disconnected that he couldn't be sure it was real. He didn't think that he would dream of Sirius being older than he was the last time they spoke though. That was a detail surely his dream mind would leave out.

“Let's go downstairs,” Sirius said. “Can you walk?”

“Yes,” James said. He finally dragged his eyes away from Sirius. He used the restroom quickly and walked back into the bedroom to find Remus and Sirius quietly whispering to each other. Nervous sweat began to prickle at his temples almost instantly.

“Come on,” Sirius said once he saw James. James followed them without question. His heart was racing, he wondered if it would ever slow.

The house — which he was barely aware of the night before, or whenever it was when he arrived — was in a middling state of disrepair. Some walls and steps seemed like they had been recently replaced, but other parts looked like they hadn't been touched in months. The

banister was covered in dust, yet all the paintings looked like they had been recently cleaned. It was very odd.

“What is this place?”

“It’s Grimmauld Place,” Sirius said. “The Black family ancestral home. I grew up here.”

“Oh,” James said. “I thought you weren’t allowed back.”

Sirius surprised him by throwing his head back and laughing loudly. “Yeah, surprisingly I hadn’t forgotten that bit. A lot has happened.”

They walked into the kitchen and the temperature instantly climbed by several degrees. It was the most lived-in room of the house that he’d seen so far and there was a feeling to it that made it more like a home than an abandoned museum.

“You guys sit down,” Remus said. “I’ll make us breakfast.”

“Dinner I think,” Sirius said, eyeing the window where they could see the sun starting to dip below the horizon.

“Dinner then,” Remus said easily. Too easily in James’s opinion. James’s presence was making both of them uncomfortable, that much was obvious, though he didn’t know what to do about it.

James took a seat at the table quickly and Sirius sat down across from him. Sirius was in the middle of opening his mouth to say something when a question tumbled out of James’s mouth. “Do you really have a son?” he whispered.

Sirius made a choking sound for a second then coughed twice before bursting out laughing.

“What?” James asked though he felt oddly relieved by Sirius’s laughter. Surely it wasn’t a sore subject then. He realized only a moment later that he probably shouldn’t have asked that in front of Remus in case he didn’t know.

“No,” Sirius said, still laughing. “Who told you that? I don’t have a son.” His laughter picked up again for a second before he finally calmed.

“That’s what the Unspeakables told me,” James said. “They said you had a son that was Ha—Harry’s age.” His voice cracked on his son’s name, his chest growing so heavy that for a second he couldn’t take a breath. Although, maybe it was longer than a second because the next time he took a deep enough breath to clear his vision, Sirius and Remus were both kneeling in front of him as he lay curled on the kitchen floor.

“Are you back with us?” Remus asked, his eyebrows furrowed in concern. James nodded twice. His face was slick with sweat, his breathing heavy and labored. They helped him up so that he was sitting, but didn’t try to make him stand.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I think you had a panic attack... or a seizure,” Sirius said with a deep frown.

“Looked like a mixture of both, to be honest,” Remus said softly.

“Oh,” James said for lack of anything else. He tried to remember what they were talking about. They had just sat down and he asked... right, about Sirius’s son. But it wasn’t his son. It was Regulus. “Why is Regulus...” James shook his head. “Why is Regulus young?”

Sirius and Remus looked at each other for a second. “I think we better start from the beginning,” Remus said.

“That’s what Kevalin always said,” James muttered unhappily.

“Who is Kevalin?” Sirius asked.

James just shook his head. He didn’t want to talk about Kevalin or the Unspeakables at all. The memory of them still felt like someone was digging a knife into the back of his skull. Sirius’s frown deepened.

“You said you were with the Unspeakables?” Remus asked.

James shook his head again before realizing how that could be misconstrued. “Yes, but I don’t want to talk about it,” he said. Sirius’s eyebrows furrowed, something sparking behind his eyes.

“James, how are you alive?” Sirius asked, his voice was stern and unhappy.

“Sirius,” Remus edged. He was giving Sirius a worried look.

“No, James, tell me how you’re alive,” Sirius said sharply. There was a disbelief in his tone that made James feel like he was on trial. “We need to know.”

“I came through the veil with your — with Regulus.” He remembered hitting the ground right after he came through the veil. Was Regulus next to him? Was he close enough to touch? The thought distressed him for some reason. It made desperation crawl along his skin.

“With Regulus?” Sirius asked with an aristocratic eyebrow raise. He knew that Sirius deferred to his judgmental upbringing when he was stressed or anxious so he rarely took it personally. For some reason though, this time he felt like he was an object being appraised for sale.

Right after he asked the question, Remus made a small noise deep in his throat. He shut his eyes instantly like he knew he shouldn’t have done it — like he shouldn’t have reacted at all. James’s eyebrows furrowed.

“What?” Sirius asked sharply. Remus’s eyes shot open.

“Nothing,” he replied quickly,

“No,” Sirius said. “Why did you make that sound?” He had a look in his eyes like he was hunting. He was like a dog with a bone when he wanted to be.

“I —” Remus stuttered. Sirius looked sharply at James.

“James, what do you know about Regulus?”

James blinked at him. He felt like he was missing something, but Sirius was waiting, an untamed wildness in his eyes. James searched through his memories, and though things were blurry, there was more there than there was a moment ago. He wasn’t sure why, but it was like part of his memories had been restored.

“I know that he’s not your son, he’s your brother. I don’t know... I’m not sure why he’s here or why he looks young.” He paused for a second before adding, “Or why he’s going to school with Harry.” His son’s name came out clearly this time and there was only a slight pressure on his chest.

“How do you know that Regulus is not my son?” Sirius asked.

James hummed. His head was starting to hurt, his eyes aching as he searched. “I think... I think I’ve been speaking to him. I remember him going to a ball with some boy.”

He thought about Regulus looking fourteen with hair that was too long for him. It was slicked back out of his face. He’d been in an alcove with a boy James didn’t recognize. *Alexander*, the name came back like a whisper, and he felt a flash of hot jealousy burn through him. James glanced over at Remus just in time to see his eyes widen in alarm though James wasn’t sure why. He was still talking, he realized, almost against his will.

“I think he’s mad at me,” he said with a sad finality. He had no memory to attach to that feeling, but he was certain that Regulus wasn’t happy with him. Sirius stood up suddenly. He looked imposing, towering over both Remus and James who were still on the ground.

“Why were you interacting with him at all? How? You were dead, but Reggie — he came back after he drowned. Did you come back too?” Sirius asked the questions one right after the other, too quickly for James to answer right away. It took him a second to catch up, to hear them all, and be able to process them.

“No, not until I came through the veil. Regulus died again. I think?” He quirked his head confusedly. Kevalin had said he died, didn’t he? “How did he die?”

“There was a battle,” Sirius said. He waved one hand around like he was dismissing the subject. “Then Harry and his friends did some ritual to bring him back, but you came through too. Why did you come through together?”

James noticed that he was asking the questions like he already knew the answer. James just shook his head, he didn’t understand why either. Remus, however, had been growing uncomfortably pale as Sirius and James spoke. Sirius’s bright eyes slid over to Remus assiduously.

“What do you know?” Sirius said in a low voice.

“I don’t know anything,” Remus said.

“Remus,” Sirius said, his voice dropping even lower.

“I don’t know anything for sure,” Remus amended. He gave James an apologetic look, and James raised his eyebrows in surprise and confusion. “There was a book that Ron was using, one that led him to use that ritual on the veil, but I’m sure it’s nothing.” He stood up and held his hands out like he was trying to calm Sirius down.

“Show me the book.”

“It’s just a bunch of nonsense.”

Sirius’s eyebrow twitched and a beat later he raised his hand and said, “*Accio* Ron’s book.”

“Sirius,” Remus said with a sigh, “I think it was from your library. I doubt that will —

He cut off when a book came flying into Sirius’s waiting palm. James could practically feel the superior smile Sirius gave Remus. Remus made a sound of regret. James stood slowly as Sirius gazed down at the book, reading the title several times over in a whisper so low that James couldn’t make out what he was saying before he opened it to a dog-eared page.

“Soulmates?” Sirius asked.

Remus’s face seemed to clear and grow more strained at the same time. “See? It’s just a bunch of nonsense.”

“You think James and Reggie are soulmates?” he said like he hadn’t heard Remus’s comment. James wasn’t sure what his own face was doing, but he felt something like dizzy elation dancing along his thoughts.

“No, I don’t think soulmates are real. It’s just a coincidence. Maybe they both came through because of you,” Remus said. James watched him with an odd feeling of detachment.

Sirius was silent, deadly silent, for a few long seconds. James turned and watched him curiously as he stared down Remus with an unreadable expression.

“Right because James and Reggie never interacted. Right, James?” Sirius said.

It took James a moment to realize he was the one being spoken to. “Oh, well —”

“Except for after you were both dead, then you were following him around as what? A ghost?” He sounded almost mocking and James felt himself fold in a bit.

“I’m not sure that *ghost* is...”

“But never when you were both alive the first time,” he said. He waited a long dangerous beat before saying, “Right?”

James had never been the best liar, but he'd kept the secret of him and Reggie from Sirius for years, he shouldn't have felt so daunted now. Of course, he'd never been asked directly about it by Sirius, and Sirius, well, he could be very intense when he wanted to be. Not to mention he was far more intimidating now that he was older, an actual grown man compared to James who still felt like a kid.

James opened his mouth, but the beat it took him to respond seemed to be damning enough.

"James," Sirius snapped. "Reggie?"

"Siri—"

"Reggie?" he hissed. "*My* Reggie."

"Sirius," Remus tried. It was a fatal error, Sirius turned betrayed eyes on Remus and Remus flinched backward.

"And you," he practically snarled. "You knew."

"No," Remus denied with a cringe.

"You knew and you kept it from me."

"I didn't know for sure."

O *h*, *Remus* , James thought regretfully.

Sirius took two panting breaths. "Who else knew? Who else lied to my face about this?" He looked cuttingly at James.

"No one knew," James said but when Sirius's eyes bored into him like they were trying to surgically remove his soul he whispered, "Lily knew."

That seemed to be the final point of no return for Sirius and he spun on his heel and stomped out of the room.

the lion.

Chapter Notes

cw: drinking to avoid problems, sexual content, some regulus/omc stuff, maybe a little dubious consent due to alcohol but it's nothing major

Regulus had only been to muggle London a few times, and really only to visit a library, so when he apparated away from Grimmauld with only the thought ‘ *anywhere without wizards* ’ he’d thought that he might end up splinching himself. Instead, he landed in an alleyway, sequestered off by the magic that prevented him from apparating straight into the middle of a muggle road. He froze the moment he landed, mentally taking stock of his body parts just to make sure there wasn’t any pain that there shouldn’t be, but no, the only feeling present was the persistent tightness that lived in his chest and the general body aches that he’d come to know well.

He walked out onto the sidewalk and glanced around curiously. It wasn’t an area that he recognized exactly, but he thought he might not be far from Grimmauld. For a moment he considered going even further away from Grimmauld, pushing the limits of his apparition skills so that he wouldn’t be found by his brother, Remus, or Ja—anyone else. However, when he looked to his right and noticed a dingy pub with the door propped open, he decided to chance it. They probably wouldn’t look for him in the muggle world anyway.

He subtly removed the glamour that made him look sixteen and hoped that the muggles wouldn’t question his age too much. The inside of the pub was dark and musty, the smell of cigarettes and old spirits burning his nostrils. There was loud music playing from somewhere above the bar, a woman’s silky voice blared loudly over the entire pub.

“ ‘Cause I know in my heart babe, our love will never die ,” she sang. Regulus nearly turned around and left the bar altogether. He clenched his teeth together and tried to pretend he couldn’t hear the lyrics. The pub itself wasn’t too empty, people were probably off of work by then and there were a few groups there eating dinner or burning off steam with their friends. Not that different from wizards, he thought.

He hadn’t thought about the differences between wizards and muggles in years. His parents and other relatives used to harp on about it for hours at dinner parties and family gatherings, but in his second life, almost no one spoke to him about muggles — except in Muggle Studies class, which he felt was an exception if there ever was one. He found that his distaste and fear of muggles had faded into the background now that he wasn’t being lectured at constantly.

“Can I get yah somethin’?” the bartender asked. Regulus realized that he was still standing a few feet in from the doorway, looking around stupidly like he was an undercover Auror on

his first day at the job.

“Yes, thank you,” Regulus said, then cleared his throat. He sounded too formal. “An ale. Please.” The bartender was a young man, maybe only in his mid-20s, the baby fat from youth still clung to his cheeks even as facial hair grew above his lips and in patches over his jaw. His eyes were unsettlingly green, much like Harry’s eyes, and Regulus had to look away from them when the bartender stared at him for too long. He felt see-through. As if every single one of his secrets was on display for the pub to see.

“Whatever yah say,” the bartender said finally with a low chuckle below his breath. Regulus wondered what he must look like, dressed in nice slacks and a thick black jumper that cost far too much. He knew he probably stood out like an elf among goblins, but he didn’t think there was much he could do about it. He should have transfigured his clothing into more appropriate muggle attire before entering the pub, but it was too late now.

The bartender set an overflowing mug of ale in front of him. It sloshed onto the already sticky counter.

“Thanks,” Regulus said. He paid the man, so grateful that he had a few pieces of muggle money in his pocket. He wasn’t sure that he knew how to use them appropriately, but they’d had to learn about muggle money systems in Muggle Studies, and it made him feel more equipped to have the muggle money with him in case he needed it.

He swallowed down nearly half of the ale in one go then looked around the pub to survey the other clientele. Most of them were wrapped up in their own conversations, a few of them were dressed in fancy muggle suits, making him feel a bit better about his clothing. There was a group of four men at a table near the back of the bar, all of them leaning in close together to hear each other over the loud music.

Each of them had middling shades of blonde hair except one who had black curly hair that fell down around his ears in the exact way James’s did. He glanced away from that black-haired man quickly, but in doing so, managed to catch the eye of another member of the group. He was obviously tall, his legs looked infinitely long stretched out beneath his table, and he had wide, strong shoulders that Regulus felt his eyes gravitate toward.

His blonde hair was cropped short, as if someone had shaved his head a few weeks ago and it was just starting to grow back. Regulus took his sparkling blue eyes, intrigued by the way he seemed to have the exact opposite appearance to James. The man stared back unabashedly, a slow smirk spreading on his face when he noticed Regulus watching him. Regulus’s face grew red without his permission, and he smiled back awkwardly before turning around, downing the rest of his ale.

“Another one?” the bartender asked before he even had a chance to set the mug down on the counter.

“Yes,” Regulus said a little roughly. He wasn’t used to chugging alcohol, especially not muggle ale. The bartender grinned and turned to grab him a refill. Regulus was in the middle of digging in his pocket for his money when a hand dropped down on the bar in front of him, a few pounds folded beneath it.

“Are you celebrating something?” a deep voice said.

Regulus looked up in surprise to find the blonde man he’d just been staring at towering over him. He swallowed, his mouth suddenly felt very dry, though he didn’t know why.

“Or are you avoiding something?” the man asked.

Regulus cleared his throat. He needed to stop doing that, he thought, it wasn’t polite. “A bit of both,” he said with a slight chuckle.

“Oh?” the man asked. He seemed to take Regulus’s response as an invitation to sit next to him. The seats were so close together that when he sat down, his entire side was brushing up against Regulus. “That sounds interesting.”

Regulus laughed despite himself, his heart was beating loudly in his ears. He felt nervous, and a little bit stupid as if he no longer knew how to conduct himself in public.

“Oh, yeah. My ex-boyfriend came back to life after being dead for fifteen years,” Regulus said sarcastically. Maybe that ale was working faster than he thought. He hadn’t eaten yet that day. He’d been too wrapped up thinking about what he learned from Snape to stomach the thought of food.

The blonde man laughed. “Wow,” he said. “I guess that would make me drink too.”

The bartender set down Regulus’s ale and glanced at the blonde man. “Something for you?”

“Yeah, just whatever he’s having,” the man said with a grin. He handed over a couple of pieces of muggle money. Regulus started fumbling for his own when the man said, “Don’t worry. I got it.” He had an interesting lilt to his words that made him sound like he had a buried German accent.

“Oh, thanks,” Regulus mumbled. His face felt like it was on fire. It must have been the ale. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“How else am I going to get to hear about your dead ex-boyfriend?” the man asked. He grinned, his teeth bright and sparkling. Regulus blinked stupidly at him for a second. It was like every thought in his head vanished from his head for a moment.

“I’m actually trying very hard not to think about that,” Regulus said. He laughed a little as he said it, but it sounded forced to his ears. The man’s grin didn’t dim.

“Understandable. You’re looking for a distraction then?”

“I suppose,” Regulus said although the answer was actually *yes, Merlin, please distract me*.

“What’s your name?”

“Regulus,” he said instantly, wondering only a moment later if he should have given a fake name.

“That’s a unique name.” His grin was very distracting, too distracting. “My name’s Leon.”

“Leon,” Regulus repeated, feeling the name roll off his tongue. “Are you German?”

“You have a good ear. I grew up in Germany, I’ve been in London for five years now.”

Regulus wondered how old the man was, but he felt like that might be a rude question. He didn’t look that old, definitely older than Regulus. Taller too, he thought, as if he hadn’t already taken very thorough stock of Leon’s height earlier.

“What about you?” Leon asked politely, he leaned into Regulus’s side a bit when he spoke as if Regulus needed physical contact to know he was being asked something.

Regulus took a large sip of his ale. “No, I was born here.”

“Not surprising,” Leon said.

Regulus meant to ask him what he meant by that when he noticed the song change, he listened idly, interested in the unusual way the woman sang. He’d never heard anything like it before. He took another sip of his drink as he listened, just in time to hear the woman sing, “*Does she know how you told me you’d hold me until you died, ’til you died, but you’re still alive.*”

Regulus choked on his ale and Leon’s smile faded a bit. “Are you okay?” Leon asked.

Regulus nodded, coughing harshly. It was like the music was picked by Lady Magic herself just to fuck with him.

“You don’t like the song?” Leon asked. He was surprisingly perceptive.

“I’ve never heard it before,” Regulus confessed.

“Really? It’s a popular song. You don’t listen to much music?”

“No,” Regulus said. “I really don’t.”

“Huh,” Leon said. As if he knew that muggle music was another topic Regulus was not prepared to go into, Leon changed the subject, instantly jumping into asking bizarre and nonsensical questions about Regulus’s life. He did end up telling him how old he was (twenty-seven) and looked appropriately surprised when Regulus told him he was twenty. He wasn’t physically twenty, or mentally twenty, but he figured that was a good middle ground.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there listening to Leon talk, replying when he had to or when he was asked questions, but otherwise feeling pleasantly buzzed on muggle ale and benign conversation. At one point the group of men that Leon was sitting with came by to say goodbye, none of them bothered to speak to Regulus. Leon must do this a lot, Regulus thought, though he wasn’t sure what exactly *this* was.

After a while the pub started to fill up in earnest, the music growing even louder. Regulus had drunk more muggle ale than he’d ever drunk in his life — disregarding the fact that he’d

never had any at all. At one point a song with loud, abrasive drums started blasting from the speaker, and when he heard the lyrics, he interrupted whatever Leon was saying to laugh far too loudly.

“Really? *Hungry Like the Wolf* is what gets you?” Leon asked with a bright laugh.

Regulus shook his head, still chuckling. “I’ve never heard it before. Do mu—people really write songs like this?”

“Obviously,” Leon said. “I guess they were just filled with hunger.” He gave Regulus a vicious smile, one that made Regulus’s spine straighten. He was well on his way to being drunk. He might have been drunk already.

The wolf song finally ended and a new one started up, an acoustic guitar causing the pub to fill with a mixture of surprised, happy shouts and irritated groans. Leon was among the people who groaned, throwing his head back and bearing his long neck to Regulus’s wandering eyes.

“Surely you’ve heard this song?” Leon asked. He’d taken to asking that question about most of them, but Regulus only ever shook his head.

“Nope, sorry,” Regulus said with a laugh.

“Pathetic,” Leon said playfully. “Although, this one is terrible. You’re better off not knowing it.” As he spoke, a group of people started loudly singing along to it.

“*I said maybe!*” they shouted, all watching each other like they were experiencing magic through music.

“You about finished with your drink?” Leon asked. “I know of a place with much better music.”

Regulus downed the rest of his ale. He could barely taste it. “Let’s go,” he said. When he stood, he instantly wobbled. Leon placed a steadying hand on his lower back and guided him out of the pub. Once they were out on the street, Leon dropped his hand, but it kept brushing against Regulus’s, the backs of their hands touching every couple of steps. Leon all but towered over Regulus, whose ear only barely came up to Leon’s shoulder. He wasn’t sure that he’d ever met a man so tall. He really was the perfect distraction.

It didn’t take long to get to the next place, they only had to walk a handful of blocks, and Leon filled the silence easily. He seemed to be able to talk endlessly with very little feedback from Regulus. Not that Regulus minded, it was nice to just float for a bit. His worries were comfortably silenced by the alcohol rushing through his bloodstream.

“Here we go,” Leon said, gesturing to a set of imposing double doors. He opened one for Regulus who walked in quickly. A huge man was standing just inside the doors, his burly arms crossed over his chest. “Hey, Mike. He’s with me.”

The huge man, *Mike*, nodded at Leon and gave Regulus what must have been an attempt at a smile. It looked out of place on his stern face. They passed by him without another word and entered another bar. This one was far nicer than the other one, bright lights flashed, and loud, upbeat music played from the speakers. The space was filled with men and women dressed in what looked like costumes. Some of them were covered in sequins or shimmering fabrics, others were wearing elaborate headpieces that made them look like magical birds.

“What is this place?” Regulus asked, all but shouting directly into Leon’s ear.

“It’s a club,” Leon said. He said the name but it was too muffled for Regulus to make out. “I used to work here. Come on.” He grabbed Regulus by the hand and pulled him through the thick wall of people. Regulus held on tightly. He was a bit dizzy from the alcohol.

The next thing he knew he was at the bar, and Leon was setting down a shot glass full of clear liquid in front of him.

“What is this?” Regulus yelled over the music.

“Just shoot it and try not to dwell on the taste,” Leon said with a silent laugh. Regulus gave him a questioning look, but Leon picked up his own glass and offered it up for Regulus to cheers. Regulus shook his head with a smirk and did so, tipping it back into his mouth and swallowing as fast as he could.

The taste was impossible not to dwell on, it burned as it went down and he coughed and gagged twice before he got himself under control. Leon was obviously laughing at him, though the sound was muted beneath the music. Regulus rolled his eyes, only a little annoyed. A moment later, Leon dragged him out into a crowd of people who were slowly rocking to the music.

Regulus had never danced with anyone like this. The closest he’d ever come was the Yule ball and people weren’t grinding up against each other there like they were in the bar. Regulus felt a moment of panic when he realized he had no idea what to do, but was instantly distracted when Leon spun him around and plastered his chest to Regulus’s back, grabbing his hips and moving him in time to the rhythm.

Regulus thought that had he been even slightly more sober he would have been horribly embarrassed, but as it was, the liquor he’d just downed was starting to hit him, and he found it surprisingly easy to let go. He didn’t think about James, Horcruxes, or anything else. He forgot about the wizarding world altogether and let himself exist completely disconnected from it all.

He wasn’t sure how much time passed like that, but song after song played as Regulus grew sweaty and far drunker than he’d been in years. One specific song started playing, a bizarre beat filling the room as people around him reacted in excitement. He couldn’t make out the lyrics, but the song felt more sexual than the others and everyone seemed to react in kind, including Leon. Regulus hadn’t noticed before but he was suddenly very aware of the hard length pressing against him.

“Want to go outside?” Leon said into his ear. Regulus just nodded and let Leon drag him away. They walked by a long line for two tiny bathrooms and through a heavily graffitied door in the very back of the club. Leon kicked it open and they spilled out into the chilly London air. They were in an alleyway, two imposing brick walls stacked up on either side of them.

Regulus only had a moment to look around before Leon shoved him up against the wall and kissed him. Regulus groaned quietly, the breath pushed from his lungs at Leon’s rough handling of him, and after only a moment’s surprise, he kissed him back, rising up onto his toes and circling his arms around Leon’s neck.

Regulus hadn’t kissed that many people in his life, so he didn’t have that much to compare to, but he didn’t think that Leon was a very good kisser. His lips were too demanding, and whenever Regulus would try to meet them, Leon would shove his face against Regulus’s as roughly as he could manage as if the act of force was enough to make up for his lack of finesse.

Even in his drunken state, he was starting to regret this decision and was about to push Leon away when Leon pulled back of his own accord and dropped to his knees. *Oh*, Regulus thought dumbly, losing his balance for a second and catching himself on Leon’s broad shoulders. This was a much better idea than kissing, he decided, as Leon deftly unbuttoned his trousers and pulled them down just enough so that his cock met the cool air.

He threw his head back and moaned when the warm heat of Leon’s mouth enveloped him. *Salazar*, it had been a long time. Too long.

“Fuck,” he mumbled, looking back down to stare into Leon’s mischievous eyes. He blinked once and they turned that dizzying hazel color, a mixture of greens, blues, golds, and browns. Regulus gasped in shock, but Leon must have taken it for a sound of pleasure as he redoubled his efforts to swallow Regulus down.

Regulus tried to see Leon’s blue eyes and his blonde hair, but all he could see was hazel. Hazel eyes and black hair. His undoing. He shook his head, his heart speeding up in panic. This never happened with Barty. Suddenly, the image of Barty’s angry sneer filled his head, the sneer that directly proceeded the Cruciatius Curse being flung at Regulus.

“Stop, stop,” Regulus begged. He was panting now, but not in the way he wanted to.

Leon’s eyebrows furrowed and he pulled off with a reluctant frown. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I need — I need to —” Regulus said. Leon tilted his head to the side, a look of mild concern on his face. Suddenly, Regulus couldn’t stop picturing James again.

“Do you want some water?” Leon asked.

“Please,” Regulus gasped. Leon nodded and jumped to his feet, striding over to the door and entering the bar. The music spilled out for a moment before the area returned to blissful quiet.

Regulus took two deep breaths to calm himself then looked down and noticed that Leon hadn't even bothered to rebutton his pants.

He tucked himself away quickly, closing up his trousers. Just in time too because a second later there was a sharp popping sound at the end of the alley. Regulus grabbed for his wand without a second thought but stopped himself from casting anything when he saw who it was.

"Kreacher," he said sharply. He'd explicitly told the elf that he didn't want to see him, yet here he was.

"Master Regulus," Kreacher greeted fearfully. He popped away and not even a second later popped back with Sirius in tow.

"There you are," Sirius snarled. Kreacher disappeared without another word, and Sirius started stomping down the alleyway toward Regulus.

"What are you doing here?" Regulus asked.

"Looking for you," Sirius said. There was something in his voice, a disappointment that turned Regulus's stomach, and without preamble, he bent at the waist and threw up all over his shoes. "*Evanesco*."

Sirius vanished the vomit before Regulus could even stand up, then he grabbed Regulus by the scruff of his neck and apparated them away. Regulus shouted in surprise, his knees buckling the moment they landed. Apparating while drunk had to be one of the worst experiences of all time. He leaned back onto his heels and looked up at Sirius's disappointed expression.

"Why did you do that?" Regulus asked angrily.

"Why did I do that?" Sirius replied harshly. "Are you kidding? No one knew where you'd gone! Harry has been freaking out. What were you doing?"

"I was having sex with a muggle," Regulus said triumphantly. His triumph was only a little ruined by the way his words were slurred and by the way he was still kneeling on the ground. He frowned, then added, "Or trying to."

Sirius looked truly flabbergasted, his mouth and eyes opening so wide that he looked like he might have a fit.

"I wasn't doing anything wrong," Regulus muttered. He climbed to his feet unsteadily, deciding only halfway up that standing was more work than it was worth, and started climbing onto his bed. He hadn't noticed they were in his bedroom until that moment.

"The world isn't safe," Sirius said when he finally managed to regain his ability to lecture. "There are Death Eaters out there, and Voldemort. What do you think would have happened to you if they found you?"

Regulus flopped down onto the bed and gave an over-the-top shrug. “I guess they would finally put me out of my misery. You really don’t have anything to say about the muggle thing?”

Sirius threw his hands up in the air. “I’m trying my best to ignore it actually!” he shouted.

“Eugh, so loud,” Regulus complained. “Can you yell at me about this later? I’ve had a very taxing day.” His eyes closed of their own volition.

“Did you run off to a muggle club because of James?” Sirius asked. Regulus’s eyes snapped back open.

He wanted to ask Sirius why he’d said that, but what he actually said was, “I don’t want to talk about Ja—Harry’s father.”

“Uh-huh,” Sirius said in a tone that Regulus definitely did not appreciate. “Fine, we’ll talk about it tomorrow. I’ll go see if I can find a hangover potion. You’ll probably need one in the morning.”

Regulus watched him go suspiciously. He didn’t like Sirius’s knowing tone, not at all, but if he was going to give Regulus a moment of respite, then Regulus was going to take it. He clumsily pulled off his shoes and threw them across the room haphazardly before crawling under his blankets and purposefully thinking of anything that wasn’t James or Harry.

the parlor.

“Lily knew.”

Sirius didn't know that he'd ever heard a statement so painful. Even after all the years in Azkaban, all the awful things he'd lived through, the things he'd witnessed, those two words somehow cut him in half, and he was left bleeding out. He didn't remember leaving the kitchen, or where he went afterward, but the next thing he knew, he was curled up on the floor in the parlor closet.

The parlor in Grimmauld Place wasn't used often, even when the house was regularly inhabited by his family members. It really only served as a place to sequester unwanted guests so that they wouldn't have to be interacted with. As such, the closet was often left empty, sometimes it was used to hang up guests' coats, but otherwise, nothing was permanently stored there.

That's why it was such a good place for Walburga to lock up her children. When they were very little, before Walburga and Orion began to devolve into other forms of punishment — they grew desperate in their old age, especially as their heir failed to fall in line — they favored an “out of sight, out of mind” style of punishment.

If Sirius talked back, or if Regulus refused to eat with the family, Walburga would ignore them, give them a silent treatment that couldn't be undone, no matter how much they begged. When that failed to fix their behavioral issues, she started locking them in the closet. She would always do it with a deep frown on her face as if it was hurting her more than it was hurting them.

Sometimes Sirius thought that his mother was genuinely distressed by the punishments she felt she had to enact on her children. She didn't love them, he didn't think, but she had expectations of what it would mean to be a mother. Perhaps what it would feel like, and how it might change her when she met her sons for the first time. He didn't think she really wanted kids, but there was probably some part of her that wished Sirius's and Regulus's arrivals would fix that. They were a disappointment in more ways than one. When he and Regulus would let her down, she would look despondent, an unfathomable emotion given how small their transgressions were back then.

In Sirius's opinion, that didn't make up for what she did to them. The minutes, hours, and — one time — days spent locked in a dark closet weren't ever warranted, no matter what he or Regulus had done. When he had moved back into the Grimmauld Place, he had considered vanishing the closet altogether. Locking the door, making the space unplotable, and vanishing the memory of the room in his head so that it would never be found, but the magic of the Black family's ancestral home was strong, old, and intricate, and he worried what effect that kind of reckless magic would have on the place.

So the closet was left alone, and Sirius did his best not to think about it, until of course, he found out that Remus and James had been lying to him for years. Well, James had been dead,

but he had spent the final years of his life lying to Sirius. And even Lily, who was the only person to befriend Sirius when he felt like a rotting sore in his other friend's lives, had also lied to him. No one trusted him. No one did.

So he took that knowledge, the painful, hollow feeling of anger, self-hatred, and insurmountable grief, and he let it wrap around him like a blanket as he curled onto the floor of the parlor closet. It was a place of punishment as a child, and it would serve such a purpose again. No one in his life trusted him, no one was willing to tell him the truth. There was something wrong with him. He'd always known there was, but to have it confirmed...

He let the darkness act as a shield and let the betrayed nausea roll through him. If James didn't trust him, if Lily didn't... he must not have deserved it. Remus hadn't trusted him with anything, he still kept secrets about the first war and about what he did when he left Grimmauld alone. He believed that Sirius was a murderer for twelve years. Remus hadn't trusted him for a long time, he shouldn't have been surprised by the lack of trust now.

Strangely, he did not think of Regulus. Of everyone that Sirius would have expected to tell him about this, Regulus was not included. Regulus always held his emotions close to the chest, and he hadn't trusted Sirius since Sirius was first sorted into Gryffindor. Never in a million years would Sirius have expected Regulus to divulge this kind of secret.

That did not make it hurt any less, of course. The fact that Regulus could be in his life again and still not trust him was unbelievably painful, but he wasn't surprised by it. Clearly, he didn't deserve Regulus's trust if even James and Lily could distrust him.

He lost track of time in the darkness. It felt like his mind was melting out of his ears, dripping down onto the floor. It almost felt like he was back in Azkaban. If he was honest, and he might as well be since no one else was going to bother, he did start to wonder if this had all been a terrible nightmare in the last moments of his life before the dementors of Azkaban sucked out his soul for good. Was he still there? Did he imagine everything that had happened over the last few years?

The door to the closet opened, and Sirius glanced up to see Remus standing over him. He was dressed in dark clothes and for a second he looked just like the dementors of Sirius's nightmares. On instinct, Sirius transformed into Padfoot and growled.

Remus gave a very tired sigh which Sirius thought was a bit insulting all things considered. Remus had been included, he'd been told, what did he have to be upset about?

"Sirius," Remus said. Sirius barked. "I thought you had left. Have you been here the whole time?"

Sirius stood, walked in a small circle, then settled back onto the floor. He was wrapped up as tightly as he could manage as if to protect his organs from a predator. Remus's torso jerked oddly, his hand making an aborted movement to reach out before he pulled it back. He took a very deep, steadying breath, then lowered himself to the floor so that he was sitting across from Sirius, blocking the doorway with his body.

“I can’t believe that James has only been back for one day and you two are already fighting,” Remus said thoughtfully. “You would think you would have been happy to see him. That maybe that happiness would override whatever anger you feel right now.”

Sirius gave another warning growl. He already felt terrible, he didn’t need a guilt trip. He’d had enough of those for a lifetime. He glared at the man — or tried to, it was difficult to glare as a dog. Remus seemed to understand regardless.

“I want to explain,” he said. “James is…” He looked away for a moment and worried his bottom lip. Sirius had to stop himself from going to him. “He’s upset, but I can’t explain why he did what he did. I can only explain myself. If you’ll let me.”

Sirius got the very immature urge to bite Remus. Not very hard, not even hard enough to break the skin, but just a childish, animalistic, show of anger. He huffed through his nose, and when Remus tilted his head slightly, he wagged his tail twice to say, ‘ *Yes, please explain* .’

“I didn’t know about Regulus and James forever. I haven’t known since the beginning, I mean,” he said. He shook his head like he was already tripping over his words.

He sounded tired. Sirius hadn’t slept well the night before, James’s arrival had removed any semblance of rest from his foreseeable future, and it was obvious that Remus felt the same. Sirius wanted to go to him again, he wanted to crawl forward on his belly and snuggle up with him. Remus always found it easier to talk when he had Padfoot in his arms.

“I knew he was sneaking around while we were at Hogwarts, or I at least suspected it. I found him coming out of a storage closet one time in sixth year. I didn’t know who he was sneaking around with, and I’m not sure I would have ever guessed that it was Regulus. I figured that he would come clean eventually, at the time it didn’t seem like that big of a deal.

“Then seventh year started and James was — I don’t know — different and I figured something had happened. A few months later, he started dating Lily and I forgot about the whole thing. I figured that it had ended badly with whoever he was sneaking around with and that he didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t blame him for not bringing it up and he seemed so happy with Lily.”

Sirius made an involuntary noise, a low snarl deep in his chest. Remus was looking away from him, staring off into the distance, and seemingly distracted enough to forget that Sirius was mad at him because he reached out and started scratching behind Sirius’s ears. Sirius thought about snapping at him, but the feeling was so nice that he let it slide.

“Then they both died,” he said distantly. The pain was so obvious in his voice that Sirius finally gave in to the urge to crawl toward him. Remus opened his arms and let Sirius come a bit closer. “It wasn’t until after I moved into Grimmauld with you that I thought about it again. I didn’t know Regulus well when we were in school, but he was so protective over Harry. Almost as if Harry was his son. It made me suspicious.”

Sirius laughed, it came out like a tiny *boof* .

“I know,” Remus said, he smiled slightly but it faded almost instantly. “I don’t think I understood that Regulus and James had been together consciously at first, but then before Regulus left for his and Harry’s fifth year, we got into... an argument, I guess, and the answer just came out of me.”

Sirius tilted his head against Remus’s shoulder — a silent question.

“I accused him of being in love with James,” Remus said, cringing slightly. “I didn’t know I was going to do it until I’d already said it. Regulus didn’t really deny it, but it was clear he would come after me if I told anyone. It wasn’t my finest moment though. I wasn’t anxious to bring it up again.”

Sirius was surprised. He’d always thought that Remus and Regulus would get along, it was difficult to imagine them fighting. Especially fighting about something that was completely unrelated to Sirius. It felt like Remus knew a side of Regulus that Sirius hadn’t seen.

“I was embarrassed,” Remus admitted, “that I’d been arguing with Regulus. And James was gone. It felt like a secret that didn’t belong to me, and one that would cause more pain than anything if I told you.”

That was finally what made Sirius transform back. He backed away from Remus as he did it so that they were no longer touching.

“You don’t get to decide what secrets I get to know, even if they’ll cause me pain,” he said sharply. The hurt was still so raw.

Remus frowned. “I’m sorry,” he said instantly.

“Why didn’t James or Lily tell me?” Sirius asked. Then, without meaning to, he bared his biggest insecurity. “What is wrong with me that they didn’t feel like they could tell me?” He could only feel grateful that his voice didn’t hitch as he said it, but he felt dangerously close to crying.

Remus’s mouth fell open. “There is nothing wrong with you,” Remus said.

“That’s obviously not true if everyone in the world thinks I’m capable of so many terrible things. Not trustworthy enough to be told about James and my own bloody brother, then locked away for a murder I didn’t commit. There must be something wrong with me.”

Remus’s frown deepened further and a look of guilt crossed his features. “I’m —” he choked on whatever his next word was going to be. “I think you should talk to James.”

Sirius felt the most bizarre mixture of feelings: elation and disbelief that James was alive, pain over the lies he’d been told, and finally, regret that he’d let that emotion take over the happiness he felt to see James again. He wanted to talk to James so badly, all he’d wanted to do was talk to James just one more time while he was in Azkaban, he thought about it for hours and hours. Now he was back by some unknown magic, and Sirius couldn’t manage his emotions well enough to stay in a room with him.

“Where is he?”

“He’s still in the kitchen,” Remus said. “I think something really horrible happened to him. If he’s been alive for as long as Regulus has, then he spent a lot of time in the hands of the Unspeakables.”

Sirius’s throat was too tight to respond, but he nodded in agreement.

“I can’t believe he’s alive,” Sirius whispered, fear trickling in uncomfortably.

“I know,” Remus said. “But he is. He’s real and he’s here.”

“And he used to date Regulus,” Sirius said monotonously.

Remus chuckled. “It’s hard to picture.”

Sirius nearly agreed before coming up short. “Not that hard,” he whispered.

James was indeed still in the kitchen when Sirius went to find him. It took him a bit to leave the closet even after he finished his conversation with Remus. Remus didn’t leave him though, he just sat across from him quietly and waited for Sirius to sort out his thoughts. When Sirius entered the kitchen, he found James sitting at the table with his hands folded in front of him, a hot cup of tea sitting forgotten next to him. His eyes were red and puffy, they looked too vulnerable not hidden behind his glasses.

He’d worn the same pair of glasses for the first five years of Hogwarts before he was forced to get new ones when he outgrew the old ones. Sirius had made him get the same design. He didn’t like too much change with James, James meant safety and Sirius couldn’t stand a change in his safety. It felt wrong to see his bare face again. He wondered how much James could actually see.

“Sirius,” James breathed, and Sirius was so mad at him, he felt so hurt, but this was *James*. Twenty-one-year-old James who looked like he did the last time Sirius had seen him, except much skinnier and much more haunted.

“James,” he choked and the two of them rushed forward, James so quickly that the chair tipped over behind him and clattered loudly to the floor. Sirius caught him in his arms and held him as tightly as he could, squeezing him against his chest like James could become a part of himself if he tried hard enough.

“I should have told you,” James cried into Sirius’s neck. “I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I’m sorry.”

“James,” Sirius said quietly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was my fault,” James whispered. The moment the words were out, escaping James like a terrible curse, he sagged against Sirius. Sirius had to tense to continue holding him up.

“What was your fault?” Sirius asked quietly, even as he strained to keep James on his feet.

“Regulus dying. I could have stopped it,” James said miserably. Up until that point, Sirius hadn’t thought about the seizure James had endured earlier that day, but it was like that confession was too much for his mind and he started choking and jerking in Sirius’s arms.

“Remus!” Sirius shouted. He hadn’t followed Sirius into the kitchen, quietly giving Sirius a moment to talk to James alone.

“What?” Remus said. He sounded like he was down the hall, but Sirius could hear his socked feet against the floor hurrying toward him. He barreled into the kitchen just as Sirius was forced to lower James to the ground. “Oh no.”

“What do we do?” Sirius asked frantically. James's chest and arms were heaving violently, but Sirius tried to hold him still so that he didn’t hit anything else in the kitchen.

“I think we need to call someone,” Remus said, crouching next to James and covering his mouth with one hand. “He needs medical attention.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for too many people to know that he’s alive,” Sirius whispered. “We don’t know who’s looking for him.” *What if someone tries to take him from me ?*

Remus nodded. He touched Sirius’s shoulder, squeezing it firmly. “I think I know who we can trust.”

James was tired of waking up. He used to love waking up — in the morning, from a nap — he loved it because there was always something good to wake up to. Now, whenever he woke up, he just remembered the cell. The general ache in his body was instantly present. He gasped when he woke this time like he’d been quietly suffocating, and he jolted into a sitting position.

“Please, lay back, Mr. Potter,” a stern, familiar voice said.

James blinked blearily in the general direction of the voice, and when he felt strong hands press against his chest, he laid back into the bed with a huff.

“Still so anxious to get going.”

“Sorry,” James said.

There was a beat of silence. “You need to get a new pair of glasses, Mr. Potter.”

“I know,” he replied, then yawned widely. Finally, she came into focus, walking closer to where he lay in the bed and bending over slightly so that he could make out her features. “It’s good to see you again, Madam Pomfrey,” he said cheekily.

She didn’t smile, she never did, but he thought there might have been a slight twitch to her lips. “You need to take your potions, Mr. Potter,” she said in a disappointed voice. “Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin tell me that you refused to take the potion that will heal your skin. Didn’t I tell you that it was bad to use so many cleaning charms?”

He smiled. "You did," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry won't heal the body," she said, moving to the other side of the room to presumably grab the potions she was talking about. There was something nice about it, something in the way she treated him like he wasn't some breakable object, but instead a troublemaking student at Hogwarts, that made him feel safe.

He accepted the potions that he'd rejected earlier without complaint, letting her help him sit up slightly so that he didn't spill on himself.

"Now," she said, "why don't you start by telling me what happened to you?" He looked around the room curiously before responding, but she jumped in to explain. "No one else can hear you. It is just us."

He breathed a sigh of relief. He loved Sirius and Remus so much, and he was so happy to be with them again, but he realized that there was a part of him that didn't want to tell them all the bad things that had happened to him. He didn't want them to know. What would they think about him if they knew?

"Go on," Madam Pomfrey prompted.

He cleared his throat once then told her the entire story, everything he could remember. He didn't have another fit or another seizure, though there were moments when his heart rate would pick up and he felt like he couldn't get a deep enough breath. It was touch and go. Pomfrey listened without interrupting, sometimes she would subtly squeeze his hand, but beyond that, she didn't offer anything in response. It was exactly what he needed, just an empty place to say everything.

When he was done, his throat hurt from talking too much, but Pomfrey was nodding.

"I see," she said.

"You do?" James said.

"I am not an Unspeakable, I am only a mediwitch, but I believe I understand the principle of what is happening to you."

"Okay," he said slowly. "Is it something bad?"

"I don't think so," she said matter-of-factly. "You have already endured the bad things. What is happening to you now is about healing."

James blinked at her confusedly, then said, "Healing?"

"Yes. You have gone through a terrible ordeal, not just because of what the Unspeakables have done to you, but because of the lack of safety you felt for so many months. You say you do not remember anything about your time beyond the veil, so to speak, but I don't think that's true." He raised his eyebrows incredulously, but she went on speaking as if she did not notice. "The only things the Unspeakables wanted from you were the secrets you held, and

they were willing to do anything to you to get it. I believe that you subconsciously locked those precious secrets away as a way to keep yourself safe.”

“Meaning what? That I could have made them stop at any point?” He didn’t mean for it to sound so accusatory, but she pursed her lips and glared slightly and he felt a bit chagrin.

“We both know that the Unspeakables were not going to let you go regardless of if they found out your secrets. No, the only reason you lived for as long as you did was because they had an incentive to keep you alive. You were trying to protect yourself.”

James wasn’t sure he understood completely, but he thought she was probably right about the Unspeakables never letting him go. Kevalin showing him his face was enough of a clue of that. “And now?”

“Though your body is still reacting with fear, you are safe. You are among friends, away from those who wish to hurt you. I believe your memories are being unveiled to you.”

James weighed that in his mind for a moment. It felt true to him, but he couldn’t be sure. “Why is it so violent though? Why not just let me remember?”

“Your body has known only violence since you have returned. It makes sense that it would respond in kind.”

James blew out a long breath. He didn’t think he liked the sound of that, but what was the point of arguing? It wasn’t like Pomfrey could change what had happened to him short of obliterating the memories out of his head, and he highly doubted she would be willing to do that. Not that he wanted that to happen. There was still Catalina to think about, the werewolf who was still stuck among the Unspeakables.

And Tom, James added sadly. Though he was dead, Tom still presumably had a son out there somewhere. James felt like he owed it to him to find that boy — now a man — and tell him what happened to his father. More than that, the Unspeakables deserved to be brought to justice. Someone had to know what happened to him. No, forgetting wasn’t an option.

“What now?” he asked quietly.

“Now, you rest. Let Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin take care of you. The memories will show up in their own time. I believe the seizures will stop after that.”

James nodded once.

“And Mr. Potter,” she added. “Make sure to replace your glasses. You’re going to need them.”

He only nodded again, mostly because he didn’t understand what she meant by that. Generally speaking, he needed his glasses for everything that wasn’t sleeping, but she said it with an ominous warning that made him wonder if there was something that was missing.

She left the room and closed the door softly behind her, leaving him alone. He threw his head back into the pillows. If he’d just had a seizure, then what memories had returned to him? He

searched through his head leisurely, checking to see if there was anything he hadn't noticed before. For a moment he thought that there wasn't anything new at all, but when he finally realized what it was, what memory had been uncovered, he wished that he hadn't made it out of the Department of Mysteries at all.

the idiots.

James Potter loved Sirius Black. He really did. He loved him, he would do anything for him. He would die for him. However, James Potter also hated Sirius Black.

“Tell me again why you and Remus aren’t together,” James said. He’d made Sirius go over this more than once, but Sirius had yet to give him a straight answer. The first two times James asked him, Sirius just up and left the room.

Sirius groaned, throwing his hands up in the air and rolling his eyes. “I already told you,” Sirius said. “He doesn’t even — my cousin — listen, a lot has happened — and I don’t even — whatever, it doesn’t matter.”

James didn’t think that he’d ever heard Sirius be so inelegant with his words. He shook his head disappointedly. He was just glad that he could finally make out the detailed features of Sirius’s face so that he could evaluate just how stupid he was acting. Sirius had gone out to get him glasses the day after Pomfrey came to the house, a magical set that shifted based on his prescription. James guessed that they were exorbitantly expensive.

Sirius had also apparently obliterated Pomfrey shortly after she left James alone, which James thought was a bit unnecessary. Sirius said she agreed to it, given the nature of James's return, and James was too annoyed with Sirius to question him further. They had bigger issues anyway.

“You need to talk to him,” James said, his voice lowering an octave. He sounded a bit like his father had when he would lecture James as a child.

“Oh, right, like you’re talking to Regulus,” Sirius snapped.

This was the fifth or sixth time they’d had this exact conversation about Remus over the past week, but Sirius had yet to pull the Regulus card, and James was just beginning to think he never would. They hadn’t talked about him and Regulus at all — not what happened before, nor what would happen now that they were both alive. Sirius had always been good at avoiding difficult subjects, and he’d only grown more adept at it over the years.

“I could talk to him,” James said slowly. Though the idea of speaking to Regulus made his heart gallop in his chest, James knew that he could do it when the time came. He was looking forward to it, in fact. He needed to explain himself, he needed Regulus to understand.

“Then do it,” Sirius challenged.

James narrowed his eyes. “Fine,” he said. “Where is he? I’ll go talk to him right now.”

“He’s at Hogwarts,” Sirius said derisively. “You’re just going to show up at Hogwarts and demand to speak to him? What are you going to do when your son asks why you’re not there to see him instead?”

James blanched, blinking harshly a few times. “I know I should have contacted Harry first —”

Sirius interrupted with a sigh. “No, I didn’t mean that. I agree that we should wait to tell Harry until he’s home for Christmas. You need time to heal and he’s not going to want to be at school if he knows you’re here. I’m sorry I said that.”

James worried his lip for a few seconds. He’d wanted to contact Harry immediately, but there was a visceral fear there. He didn’t know his son and his son didn’t know him. He felt like an absentee father, though it wasn’t his fault that he hadn’t been there for Harry. It was all so complicated, and he was far more nervous about speaking to Harry than he was about Regulus.

He knew that Regulus would be upset with him, but he’d dealt with an upset Regulus more than once and he knew he could handle it. But what if Harry was mad at him? What if he was upset that he hadn’t been there? What if he was making a mistake by not contacting him immediately?

“James,” Sirius said, his voice cutting through the worry like a knife through butter. Even with all the time they’d spent separated from each other, Sirius still knew him so well. “You need time to rest. Harry will understand.”

James nodded, noting that Sirius left Regulus out of that statement.

“So, Remus?” James said, aiming to get them back on track and away from more treacherous topics. Not that the topic of Remus was safe exactly, but just in comparison.

Sirius looked annoyed again, but he didn’t start rambling this time. “Remus doesn’t want to be with me,” he said simply. James’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “I think he’s interested in someone else.”

“How could you think that? You two are —”

“Please don’t start with that again,” Sirius said, sounding pained.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say,” James said. Sirius gave him a sardonic look. “You two are meant for each other!” he shouted, unable to help himself.

“So you’ve said,” Sirius said with a smile leached of enjoyment. “That might have been true before... well, before. But a lot has happened and I don’t think it’s true anymore.”

“Then why is he here?” James asked. He knew that Sirius didn’t want to have this conversation, he could see from the unhappy way his lips twitched that it was hurting him, but he and Remus had been reunited and yet they remained at arm’s length. They were doing that pathetic thing they used to do in fifth year where they would stare at each other when the other one wasn’t looking. James had only been with them for a little over a week and it was already starting to do his head in.

“Pity,” Sirius mumbled.

“What was that?” James asked.

“He pities me, that’s why he’s here.”

James rolled his eyes so hard that it hurt. “You’re both so stupid.”

“Hey! You don’t get to call me stupid!”

“Oh, really? Because I just did,” James said snidely.

“Are you two bickering again?” Remus said tiredly, cracking open the door to the bedroom and poking his head in.

“Yes,” Sirius said.

“No,” James said at the same time.

Remus smirked slightly and entered the room fully. He had a tray full of breakfast food floating behind him.

“Breakfast for dinner again?” Sirius asked, a gentle smile on his lips.

“Yeah, I hope that’s okay.” Remus smiled back at Sirius, his eyes a little dazed. James rolled his eyes again.

“Hand it over,” James said jokingly. “I’m starving.”

They ate together sitting around the bed, James propped up against the pillows and Sirius and Remus sitting on either side in sturdy armchairs that Sirius had summoned from somewhere else in the house.

“Was this your room growing up?” James asked.

Sirius swallowed a mouthful of food and then said, “No, I gave that room to Harry. This was a guest room.”

“You didn’t take the master?” James asked curiously.

Sirius smirked at Remus, a tiny secret exchange, then replied, “No, that room was otherwise occupied.” He chuckled. “Should I tell him the story?”

“You might as well,” Remus said, shaking his head fondly. Sirius then launched into a long and detailed story about his escape from Azkaban, starting with the news article about the Weasleys where he’d spotted Peter.

James still wasn’t sure how he felt about Peter, he’d regained the memory of Regulus asking him about Peter’s betrayal, but even with that added context, he didn’t know how to sort out his feelings. He was worried about triggering another seizure — even if they were necessary, that didn’t mean they were fun — so he opted to avoid thinking about it for the time being.

Sirius finished the story by describing his escape from Hogwarts on the back of a condemned Hippogriff named Buckbeak. He'd been hiding out with Buckbeak in Grimmauld Place after escaping, and Buckbeak had been giving Sirius's mother's room. It was technically also his father's room, but Sirius thought that Orion spent most of his time sleeping elsewhere in the house.

"Is Buckbeak still living here?" James asked. He would love to see a Hippogriff cuddled up in Walburga's bed.

Sirius laughed. "No, unfortunately, Regulus wouldn't allow him to stay in the house. He said it was unsanitary."

"He's probably right about that," Remus muttered with a smile.

"So he's back with Hagrid, under a new name mind you, but he's back with his own kind."

"Well, that's good," James said, only a little disappointed. "So the room is just empty now?"

"Pretty much," Sirius said with a shrug. "I never cleaned it out and Kreacher wasn't willing to take care of it."

"Where is Kreacher anyway?" Remus said.

Sirius shook his head. "I don't know, he hasn't been responding to me. He might be with Regulus at Hogwarts. He didn't mention anything about it, but it's just the kind of thing he would do."

"I thought Kreacher had to respond to you. Aren't you the head of the house?" Remus asked, furrowing his eyebrows as he spoke.

"Yes, technically, but the rules for house-elves aren't as firm as most people believe. If he wants to listen to Regulus instead of me, then he can do so most of the time. It's fine though, I hate having him around."

James noticed the muscle over Sirius's right eyebrow twitch slightly and decided to steer them away from the topic of Kreacher. "So what else has happened since you left Azkaban?" James asked.

Sirius and Remus jumped into more stories about the Triwizard Tournament and the terrible professor that Minister Fudge had forced into Hogwarts. James remembered parts of it, he vaguely remembered talking to Regulus about the tournament, though there were still several parts he didn't recall.

"What happened to Professor Umbridge? Did she get fired?" James asked. He could tell they were approaching Regulus's second death from the way Sirius's eyes started to grow unfocused.

"She went missing," Remus explained. "They're still looking for her. Apparently, she went into the Forbidden Forest and was never seen again."

James's eyebrows raised. "What do you think happened to her?"

"I don't know," Remus said honestly. "It could have been the centaurs, they had been growing restless with the Ministry boxing them in, but there are a ton of dangers in that forest. Anything could have happened to her."

Later that evening, when Sirius and Remus had returned to their rooms — they'd stopped sleeping in James's bed after the first night and James was too embarrassed to ask them to come back — James started thinking about Umbridge again. And Barty. He couldn't stop thinking about Regulus's old friend Barty. Sirius said that he'd died, some kind of freak magic that had shot out of Regulus while he was being attacked, but something about it didn't seem right to James.

The thing about the seizures is that the more James had them, the better he was at predicting when one was about to start. He was lying on his back, trying to remember if he and Regulus had talked about Barty. What was he missing? Sweat broke out across his forehead, his heart rate started to pick up, and his fingers began to twitch and tremble. He took one last deep breath before his jaw locked up and he lost himself to darkness.

He woke up briefly after the seizure, but only long enough to recognize that he'd survived before he fell into a heavy sleep. The next time he opened his eyes, he remembered. Barty and Regulus had been... involved. James's stomach twisted. He closed his eyes, but he couldn't stop picturing them together. The image made him feel ill.

Why did Barty attack him like that? His heart clenched when he thought of the suffering Regulus had endured at Barty's hands. Before James had killed him, he remembered. It was strange to think of himself as a murderer. It wasn't like he was technically alive when it happened, but he could remember the surge of power as he lashed out at Barty. He killed him and he wasn't even sure he felt bad about it. He should feel bad about it, Lily would want him to feel bad about it. That thought brought him up short. What would Lily think about it? He wished he could ask her.

"Tell me how you and Regulus... how you two..."

"Started dating?" James asked, confused. Sirius made a face of disgust but nodded. James looked over at Remus uncertainly, but he only shrugged. As if to say, '*This was his idea.*' Sirius hadn't bothered to ask about Regulus directly yet beyond the one mention during their conversation about Remus.

James had been there for a bit over two weeks now and they had fallen into a certain rhythm that he found oddly comfortable. He was tired most of the time, but his body was getting stronger. He'd started to gain the weight back that he'd lost with the Unspeakables. He spent most days resting or catching up with Sirius and Remus. He'd yet to make any headway in getting them together, but he was still working on it. Hogwarts wasn't built in a day.

"How did you two even start talking?" Sirius asked. He sounded angry. He hadn't really been angry yet, beyond the first moment of betrayal. James was still waiting for the other bludger to strike.

“It started the night you left home for the last time,” James said.

Sirius’s eyebrows furrowed. “The night I ran away? From here?” He gestured to the bedroom around them. James cringed slightly. This wasn’t his secret to tell, but there was also no way around it if he was going to be honest. He just hoped that Regulus would forgive him when he found out — and that he would forgive him for all the other awful things he’d said.

“You didn’t actually run away,” James said conversationally, doing his best to act like his heart wasn’t racing.

“What does that mean? Of course, I ran away.”

James paused before saying, “How much do you remember from that night?”

Sirius shook his head once, then looked away, chewing on his bottom lip thoughtfully. “I remember my mother losing it on me. I don’t remember why exactly. Then... I guess I remember your mom fixing me up when I got to your house.”

“You don’t remember leaving home?” Remus asked thoughtfully, tilting his head slightly.

“It was a rough night,” Sirius said defensively.

“I was only asking,” Remus muttered. Sirius gave him a betrayed look.

James looked down at his fingers awkwardly. “You don’t remember because you weren’t conscious during it. You never actually left on your own, Regulus was worried about what would happen to you if you stayed, so he brought you through the floo to my house. You were unconscious, it was — it was terrible. He made me promise not to tell you then left.”

He glanced back up to see Sirius’s mouth hanging open. “Reggie did that?” James nodded. “Why didn’t he ever tell me?”

James shrugged. “He never told me why. I tried to get him to tell you loads of times.” *Well, three times* . “But he would never budge on the issue.”

“I can’t believe I never knew,” Sirius said, his voice sounding very far away. “It’s like I didn’t know him at all.”

“He was complicated,” James said.

Sirius raised one of his shoulders sharply like he was trying to fight off an unwanted memory. “Then what happened?”

“Well, I kept trying to talk to him once we got back to Hogwarts, but you two kept fighting and he was so difficult to catch.” Remus cleared his throat pointedly. James made sure to wipe the soft smile off his lips, he hadn’t noticed it crop up but he doubted he would have been able to help it either way.

“He was such a little dick that year,” Sirius said, shaking his head. “I was so sure he was glad that I was gone.”

James gave a half shrug. “I think he was hurt, and he probably thought he was doing the right thing by pushing you farther away. Anyway,” he paused to take a deep breath, best not to speak to Regulus’s motives, “we ended up meeting a few times, and then things just spiraled from there.”

“How?” Sirius asked judgmentally.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t—” he huffed. He hadn’t expected to feel this embarrassed. “I couldn’t stay away from him. At first, I thought I was just annoying him, but he was softer than I’d expected and eventually, I realized that he liked having me around. We just fell together I guess.”

Sirius was holding his face in an uncomfortable sneer. “Ugh,” he said, shaking his head twice. “This is so weird.”

“It’s not that weird.”

“I never wanted to imagine my baby brother with anyone, I’m not even sure that I *could* have pictured him with anyone except some stuck-up pureblood woman that he was forced to marry to *carry on the bloodline* .”

“That’s terrible,” James said, the thought of Regulus being forced to marry someone he didn’t love — someone who wasn’t James — twisting in his stomach like a knife.

“I was sure he would follow through with it too,” Sirius went on as if James hadn’t spoken. “He was always better at that stuff than I was.”

“What stuff? Forced marriage?” Remus asked. He had a stormy look on his face, James wondered if he was picturing Sirius in a loveless marriage just as James was picturing Regulus.

“Being a pureblood scion,” Sirius corrected half-heartedly. He was silent for a moment, his face doing something very complicated that James didn’t understand before he said, “I still can’t picture it. You were sneaking around with my brother? That’s so weird.”

“I know,” James replied though he didn’t think it was weird at all, he thought it was perfectly normal actually.

“I never thought you would keep something like that from me,” Sirius said in a very low voice. James’s chest clenched painfully. He wanted to apologize again.

“How did it end?” Remus asked quickly before James could respond, though he looked like he regretted the question the moment it left his lips. James frowned, this wasn’t something he wanted to recount, it wasn’t a pleasant memory.

“When we came back for seventh year, Regulus started avoiding me,” James said. His throat grew tight. “I think I knew something was wrong, but at the time, I was hoping it was nothing. When we finally met up, he told me about taking the mark. I — I ended things with him. I was so upset and I couldn’t — anyway, we broke up.”

“And Lily was what? Your way of moving on?” Sirius asked.

“Sirius,” Remus chastised.

“She wasn’t just my way of moving on,” James said patiently. He could see the hurt in Sirius’s eyes, so he tried not to take his questions too personally. “I did care for her and we spent a lot of time together that year. She wasn’t just a way for me to get over Regulus.”

Sirius was quiet for a long moment, his eyes were narrowed like he was mentally waffling between anger and acceptance. Based on his next statement, James thought that he’d landed somewhere in the middle. “Lily was too good for you.”

“Sirius!” Remus said loudly. Sirius shrugged dismissively. James knew that Lily and Sirius were friends, he never quite understood their relationship, but Sirius had a protectiveness over Lily. It was almost like Sirius considered her his sister.

“She was going to leave me,” James confessed, unable to keep the hurt from his voice. Not because Lily was going to leave him — he’d accepted that a long time ago — but because Sirius seemed to think so little of him.

“What?” Sirius asked sharply.

“She was going to leave me,” James repeated. “After the war. We talked about it a few months before Halloween. She wasn’t happy with me. I don’t think she was suffering terribly, but she didn’t love me as she should. She was planning to travel, that’s what she wanted to do. She wanted to see the world.”

He didn’t realize that he was crying until two heavy tears fell down his cheeks, dripping instantly onto his fingers.

“Oh,” Sirius breathed.

“I’m sorry,” Remus said gently.

“It’s okay,” James said. “I wanted her to be happy. And I never really got over Regulus.”

“You told her about Regulus?” Sirius asked. He already knew that Lily knew, but there was still a lost look in his eyes like he couldn’t understand why Lily knew and he didn’t.

“She figured it out actually,” James replied. “After Regulus died, she clocked the way I responded to it. I thought I was doing a good job at hiding it, but she always saw right through me.”

Sirius softened slightly. “She was always good at that,” he said softly. Then even quieter, he said, “I miss her.”

James wiped another tear. “Me too.”

That was the end of their conversation about Regulus that day, and James thought Sirius was ready to let it lie, until a week or two later when Regulus contacted Sirius to ask him to send

dress robes for himself and Harry.

“What does he need dress robes for?” Remus asked over dinner. They were actually eating at the table this time. James was just glad to be out of his room.

“Slugclub party,” Sirius said. He had unchewed food in his mouth, and Remus cringed jokingly when he saw it. Sirius chuckled.

“Slughorn is still teaching?” James asked. Did he know that? He couldn’t recall.

“He just came back this year,” Remus said. Evasively he added, “Dumbledore needed the other potions professor to take over defense.”

“The other potions professor?” James asked, remembering only a second later who it was. “Ugh, Snivellus.” Sirius laughed loudly. “How did he manage to get a job teaching kids?”

Sirius kept laughing while Remus answered, “He’s not terrible, surprisingly.” Sirius’s laughter died abruptly.

“Not terrible? He outed you as a werewolf to every student in Slytherin,” Sirius said angrily.

Remus made a quiet hissing noise as if he was in pain. “Yeah, he did do that.”

“He’s a prick,” James snarled.

“It’s fine,” Remus said quickly.

“It’s not fine!” Sirius said.

“Please, can we not argue about it? What’s done is done.” Remus said. Sirius didn’t look happy about it, but he let it drop. James, meanwhile, was having trouble tamping down his anger. It was choking him slightly.

“What are you planning to do with Regulus?” Sirius asked suddenly, shaking James from his uncontrollable emotions.

“What?” James asked. He gave Remus a confused look, but he just seemed exasperated.

“What?” he repeated.

“Are you going to —” He waved his hand around awkwardly.

James watched him bemusedly. “What?” he said for a third time.

“I think he’s asking what your intentions are,” Remus said, his lips twitching like he was trying to hold back a smile.

“Oh,” James said, his eyebrows climbing halfway up his forehead. “Umm...”

Sirius raised one eyebrow imperiously, and James felt a hot blush spread across his face.

“I guess that depends on him,” he said.

“But you want to date him?” Sirius asked.

James cleared his throat once. “I wouldn’t be opposed.”

“Oh, so he’s just a backup plan for you?” Sirius said sharply. Remus sighed tiredly and rubbed his eyes.

James’s mouth dropped open. “No? No! No, he’s not. I can’t believe you would say that.”

“I was just asking,” Sirius said, dickishly.

“I love him. He’s not a backup plan,” James said. He was unreasonably upset by the accusation. Most likely because the memory of his and Regulus’s last conversation was still fresh in his mind. Regulus likely also thought he was a backup plan for James. He hated that he’d hurt him, though he wasn’t sure that he’d have made a different choice given the option. Still, the idea that Sirius was accusing him of something that Regulus might believe to be true cut him deeply. He didn’t even have time to notice the seizure coming before it took him.

“Are you going to pick them up from King’s Cross?” James asked. It was four days before Harry and Regulus were set to return from Hogwarts and he was growing unsettlingly anxious for their arrival. He didn’t know who he was more nervous to see.

“Probably not,” Sirius replied. “Regulus will just apparate Harry here.” James fiddled with one of the destroyed chess pieces that Sirius had just knocked off the board. They had taken to playing games like they were in the Gryffindor common room every time Remus left the house. Sirius was very obviously worried about whatever he was doing, but he was careful never to mention it.

James had tried to ask Remus once where he was going, but the best explanation he got was that it was something for the Order. James wished he could just grab Remus by the arms and shake him until he started spilling all his secrets. Not to James, of course, James didn’t need to know, but Sirius hated things being kept from him. He was especially sensitive to it now that he knew so many people had kept the knowledge of James and Regulus’s relationship away from him.

It wasn’t like James hadn’t tried to talk to Remus, just as he’d tried to talk to Sirius, but Remus was even more evasive than Sirius was. He was quick to change the subject, or just leave the room altogether. It was incredibly frustrating.

“I’m nervous about seeing them,” James confessed. He had started being painfully honest with Sirius whenever he felt something now. He and Sirius used to tell each other everything when they were young, and James needed Sirius to know that he still trusted him. Sirius gave him a look of gentle pity, he’d softened to him significantly since James’s love confession.

“Don’t worry too much. Regulus might…” he looked around the room like he was searching for the right word, “overreact. I think Harry will be happy though. How could he not be? He’s spent his entire life without you. I imagine he’ll be anxious to know you.”

“What if he’s not?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, like you said, he’s spent his entire life without me. What if he isn’t happy to see me? What if he doesn’t like me?”

The honesty seared through him, but in a way where it cauterized the wounds his insecurity was making. Sirius smiled slightly. “You just need time to get to know each other. He’s a great kid. So much like Lily.” James smiled so widely that his cheeks hurt.

They decided against Regulus and Harry walking in and seeing James immediately. Everyone was on edge, Voldemort was gaining power again — a fact that James was trying very hard not to think about — and Sirius and Remus thought that Regulus was more likely to start flinging spells before asking questions.

“Just give us a chance to talk to them first,” Remus said reasonably. “That way they know we know you’re already here.”

James nodded in agreement. He hadn’t thought about it much, but there had been a shift in his dynamic with his friends now that they were so much older than him. They had lived so many years as adults that he hadn’t had the chance to, and he could feel that age difference more and more as time went on. Remus especially seemed unfathomably mature. He had always been the most mature of the four of them, but now he acted like he was sixty rather than in his thirties. Even Sirius who still held onto some of the reactionary fire from his early twenties had a mature set to his shoulders that James had never expected to see.

It made it easier and harder to take their advice. Easier because they were real adults, not the kind of pretend adults that he and Lily had been when they died. They had real-life experience. It made it harder because he now felt a bit childish every time he talked to them. There was a disconnect there, a subtle one, but he could still feel it. There was also the added fact that they were still so difficult with each other, and the maturity they had in other parts of their life made their troubling relationship that much more annoying.

James wasn’t sure he would even call it miscommunication. If anyone was miscommunicating it was Sirius and Remus with themselves rather than each other. Sirius seemed incapable of examining the complicated feelings he had for Remus, and Remus seemed to have dug himself into a hole of self-hatred that he was incapable of escaping from. James found it terribly frustrating. He would have to see if Regulus had any ideas for getting them together. He had spent more time with them.

“Are you listening?” Remus asked sternly.

“Yeah, of course,” James said quickly.

“Then what did I just say?”

“Erm...”

“Oh Merlin, it’s like having another Harry,” Sirius mumbled quietly. Remus smirked.

“I said that you can wait in the next room and we’ll call you in,” Remus said.

James nodded twice, then looked at Sirius. “And you’re not going to ambush Regulus right?”

“What does that mean?” Sirius asked. He put his hand against his chest in mock offense.

Remus rolled his eyes. “You know exactly what he means.”

Sirius gasped dramatically. “He lied to me, all of you did, I think I deserve to mock him a little.”

“I don’t want you to mock him,” James said.

“He’s my brother, you don’t get to choose whether or not I mock him.”

“It’s going to be hard enough to get him to forgive me without you making him clam up.”

Sirius rolled his eyes so hard that they disappeared completely as he groaned loudly. “This is so much worse than you being obsessed with Lily. So much worse.”

“I’m sorry,” James said seriously.

Sirius sighed quickly. “I know, James. I won’t — I’ll *try* not to make fun of him. Happy?”

James smiled at him and nodded. That was all he could ask. Though if he knew Sirius, and he liked to think that he did, then he was pretty sure he would fail that task right away.

the fight part II.

The moment Regulus disappeared, Harry started yelling.

“What is going on?” Harry said. He was looking desperately at Remus and Sirius, begging for answers, but James was distracted. Sirius had said that Harry looked just like him, that they were so similar, James had caught glimpses of Harry while he was dead, but it was nothing compared to seeing him in person.

Yes, they had the same face shape, the same black curly hair — Harry’s was especially messy, and a bit too long, he really needed a haircut — but he didn’t see himself when he saw Harry. He could spot Lily there. His eyes were obviously hers, so green that they seemed almost blinding. He had a similar nose to Lily as well, and his chin, it was strange to see her in his face.

But it wasn’t himself and Lily that James found the most bewildering. No, it was the way he held himself, the straight set to his shoulders, the slight tilt to his head, the way his lips thinned into a line as stress took over. It was all Regulus, as clear as day. Added to that was the fact that he was dressed in more expensive clothing than James had ever worn. It wasn’t that James’s family didn’t have money, but they had never been materialistic, nor had they invested much in appearing rich to others.

The Potters were the antithesis of the Black family in many ways. Light and dark magic, the places they served in wizarding society. James and Regulus were two sides of the same coin. And Harry was an odd mixture of the two, blended with an authenticity that was no doubt from Lily. A connection to the muggle world even as he found acceptance and power in the wizarding world.

Harry finally looked away from Sirius who was trying very hard to calm him down and turned his wild eyes on James. He flinched like he’d just been stabbed with a quill, a small prick of pain, before turning to Remus. “I don’t understand.”

“Why don’t you let us explain?” Remus said soothingly. Harry’s shoulders dropped slightly upon hearing his voice. It was so obvious that he trusted Remus. He looked to Sirius first, but he found stability in Remus. James understood that very well.

Harry glanced at James one more time, a quick flash of his eyes over to James’s face, before nodding and taking a seat in one of the wide-backed chairs. He was sitting on the very edge of the seat, one of his legs bouncing up and down rapidly like he couldn’t contain his anxiety without movement.

It was only after Sirius and Remus had finally taken a seat that James realized he was the only one still standing. He took a seat in the other chair, sitting across from Sirius and Remus like they were his and Harry’s parents. Sometimes it felt like they were.

“James, do you want to explain?” Remus asked. Harry looked at him again, but he seemed almost suspicious. James wondered if he wasn’t sure if he was real. How odd it must be to

have so many people disappear and reappear in his life as Regulus and now James had.

“Right,” James said awkwardly, clearing his throat, before launching into an abridged explanation for his arrival. He left out the torture, explaining that the Unspeakables weren’t sure if he was well enough to leave until recently. Remus and Sirius would know he was lying about that specific detail, but they still didn’t know the extent of the torture he’d endured, and James wasn’t interested in telling them.

“You came through the veil with Regulus?” Harry asked. He seemed dazed, James didn’t blame him, it was a lot of information to take in all at once.

James swallowed harshly. “Yes, I came through with Regulus,” he answered.

Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly as he gave James an appraising look that James didn’t understand. Sirius gasped suddenly. “Oh my — You know. Don’t you?” Sirius said. His voice wasn’t sharp like it might have been if he was talking to anyone else, but that hurt was still there.

Harry looked a bit embarrassed and caught as he responded, “Know what?” He wasn’t a very good liar and the blush on his cheeks didn’t help.

One of Sirius’s eyes twitched dangerously, and Remus gave James a look of distress. Harry made a tiny humming noise, just a split second of sound, then said, “Yes, I know.” Sirius made a pained noise, and when his eyes met James’s, James could see the final nail in the coffin shoved into place.

James knew that Sirius had been wrestling with feelings of betrayal since James had returned. He seemed to vacillate between anger and happiness at having James back in his life. Now there was nothing, his face settled into a disappointed acceptance. He was really the last to know, and James got the very intense worry that he might never be forgiven. He loved Sirius so much, in many ways Sirius felt like the other part of himself, and now he was looking at him like they were complete strangers.

“Where do you think Regulus went?” Harry said finally. He was looking between them but whether he was picking up on the tense energy in the room or not, James couldn’t be sure. “There are Death Eaters out there and if anyone finds out that he’s not who he says he is. Or even if they think he’s really your son.” He gestured toward Sirius. “They might target him.”

His voice had risen an octave or two as he ranted, and he was now scratching nervously at his forearm like he could remove the danger by rubbing it away.

“I’m sure he just needs time to cool down,” Remus said reasonably. “Regulus knows how to take care of himself.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Harry said sharply. He abandoned his forearm and started scratching at the side of his neck. “I think something happened at the party last night, he was different today. I could tell there was something wrong.” His eyes widened suddenly. “And I was supposed to talk to him. At the party, I —” He blushed bright red. “I was supposed to talk to him,” he repeated. “We have to go get him.”

“Okay,” Remus said very evenly. He stood up and walked over to Harry just as Harry jumped out of his seat. Remus gently grabbed Harry’s fingers in his own, pulling them away from his scratched-up skin. “We’re going to find him. Sirius.”

Sirius looked up at him, his eyes distant and cold. “What?”

“You’re going to find Regulus?”

Sirius ground his teeth together, James wondered what he was holding himself back from saying.

“Sirius,” Remus repeated — he had started rubbing Harry’s shoulder while he spoke, and Harry seemed to lean into him slightly. “Please.”

“I knew he would overreact,” Sirius said, his voice oddly dead. “I don’t think it’ll help him for me to show up and drag him back here.”

Remus’s eyes widened. He was annoyed, that much was obvious, but Sirius didn’t seem bothered by it. Sirius’s eyebrow twitched slightly, a tiny show of arrogance.

“Harry,” Sirius said. Harry glanced at him hurriedly. He had been staring at the ground, his eyes glancing around rapidly. “Let’s go into the kitchen and eat dinner. If Regulus isn’t back in a few hours, I will go look for him.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Sirius kept talking.

“Any Death Eater that happens upon Regulus will sorely regret it. We both know that, right?” He smiled gently. James expected it to be fake while his other emotions were clearly taking the reins, but it seemed authentic. He wondered if Sirius was purposefully making it believable for Harry, or if he truly wasn’t worried about Regulus.

Harry chuckled slightly though it sounded strained. “Right,” he said faintly. “Yeah, I am hungry.”

“I know,” Sirius said. He reached out and wrapped a hand around Harry’s shoulders, not so subtly knocking Remus’s hand out of the way while he did it. A flash of hurt crossed Remus’s face, but Sirius didn’t see it. He was already leading Harry out of the room, away from both of them.

James sat there in the silence that remained, his chest feeling cracked open. Would he and Sirius ever be friends again?

“Did you know that Harry knew?” Remus asked softly.

“No, I don’t think so,” James said slowly. He couldn’t be sure. “I should have told Sirius,” he whispered.

Remus gave him a look of pity. “Yeah, I think you probably should have.” James closed his eyes, his chest clenching painfully. All he could picture was Sirius’s betrayed look. He had

messed it up so badly, and now Regulus was Merlin knows where, running from him. He just needed to talk to him. If he could just talk to him.

He didn't join the others for dinner. Remus eventually left him to his wallowing so he could eat with Sirius and Harry, before walking very quietly to his guest bedroom and locking himself inside. No one came back to check on James. Not that he expected them to, but he'd thought that Harry might at least be curious to speak to him.

Eventually, he ventured out of the living room once it grew late enough that his stomach was rumbling angrily. He entered the kitchen to find Harry talking quietly to Sirius, his hushed voice like a hiss. He was still anxious, James could tell.

"It's been so long," Harry said.

Sirius glanced up at the old, decrepit clock that hung on the wall, his eyes drifting past James like he wasn't even there. "Right. Kreacher," he called. Nothing happened. Sirius sighed frustratedly. "Kreacher. Kreacher, come here. Kreacher, I command you to come here right now."

Harry watched him with furrowed eyebrows. "Why isn't he listening to you?"

"I don't know," Sirius responded. "Kreacher. It's about Regulus. We need to make sure he's safe."

Suddenly there was a popping sound and a very old elf appeared across the table from Sirius. "Master called Kreacher," Kreacher said in an old croaking voice.

Sirius frowned, then stood. "Why didn't you — whatever — go find Regulus, if he's safe, then come back and take me to him."

Kreacher bowed so low that his nose touched the ground, then vanished.

"Is it normal for elves to disobey for so long like that?" Harry asked.

"Elves are very complicated," Sirius responded with a shrug.

"Don't tell Hermione that," Harry mumbled. "She'll talk your ear off about it."

"Oh, I believe it," Sirius said. He grinned, his face clearing of the worry that seemed to live there permanently. Harry softened slightly. A second later, Kreacher popped back into the room, grabbed Sirius's wrist, and unceremoniously apparated him away.

"I guess he found him," Harry said quietly.

"I'm sure he's fine," James replied. Harry looked at him for the first time since he entered the room.

"He gets very stressed out," Harry explained.

You're one to talk, James thought but didn't say. "I know," he said instead.

Harry's lips twitched. "I guess you would," he said. He looked around the room for a second, his face impossibly awkward. James himself didn't think he'd ever been at such a loss for words. "I don't know what to say to you."

James laughed, startled by the honesty. "I know," he said, still chuckling. Harry's stoicism seemed to break along with it, and soon he was laughing too.

"I'm sorry. This is so weird."

"I don't want it to be," James said honestly. "I'm sure I'm not what you would have expected —"

"You're barely older than I am," Harry said, gesturing toward him. "Sorry, it's hard to think of you as, you know, *him*. My father."

James nodded, then took a seat across the table from Harry. "Yeah, you're a lot older than the last time I saw you. I promise I won't — I just want to get to know you. If you'll allow me to."

Harry watched him carefully then nodded. "Yeah, I want that," he said, though his lips twitched again.

"What is it?" James asked. He could tell that Harry was holding something back.

"You have to be nice to Regulus," he said. James's eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "I know you two broke up or whatever, obviously you and my mom —" Another awkward cringe crossed his face. "I'm just saying that I don't want you to be mean to him. He's not a bad person."

Harry was being gentle with his words, careful, but there was a firmness there as well. He wouldn't let James come in and barrel through Regulus's life, not that James had any intention to. The idea of Harry trying to protect Regulus made him feel impossibly sappy.

"I won't be mean to him," he said, then quietly added, "I'm actually very happy to see him... Or I will be, when I finally get the chance to do so properly." Harry made a face like he couldn't decide whether he was happy to hear that or not. He was saved from responding by Sirius entering the kitchen.

"Regulus is safely back in the house," he announced. "No worse for wear." Harry blew out a relieved breath. "You better let him sleep though, I don't think he's in a state to talk tonight." Harry looked worried, so Sirius added, "He's just a bit pissed."

"Oh," Harry said. "Makes sense." He nodded a few times and yawned. "Okay, I'm going to bed then."

James and Sirius both bid him good night as he left the room, leaving behind a still and dangerous silence. Sirius was fiddling with something on the stove, but James wasn't paying too close attention to what. He wondered if he should even bother talking to him.

He cleared his throat once, his heart racing slightly. "So Regulus went out drinking, did he?"

Sirius looked at him over his shoulder, his face unreadable. “He was out shagging a muggle,” Sirius said, turning back to the stove. James released a punched-out breath, the pain instant and searing. “Guess he wasn’t as interested in seeing you as you thought he would be.”

James stared at him in shock for a few moments, but Sirius never even bothered to look over again. Slowly he rose to his feet and drifted out of the room in a daze. Regulus had been out with someone else. He’d seen James and the first thing he’d done was have drunken sex with someone else.

There was somewhere deep inside him where he knew it wasn’t fair for him to feel jealous. He’d married someone else, he’d moved on in a way that Regulus never had, that he’d never been able to. But he couldn’t help thinking of Regulus with someone else, of him touching them, kissing them. Did he let them inside him as he once had for James? Did he moan his name?

James paced the floor, back and forth, and back and forth, over and over again. He couldn’t escape it. He couldn’t close his eyes without seeing Regulus and some faceless man. Was he taller than him? Shorter? What did he look like? It was suffocating him. He tried to stop moving, even just standing in the center of the room, but the thoughts just got louder the more still he was.

He paced and paced and paced. For hours. He’d never been this hyper-focused on anything, but he couldn’t let it go. Eventually, there was a very quiet knock at the door, he swung it open. He thought it might be Regulus, but of course, it wasn’t. It was Remus.

“I’ve been listening to you pace for hours,” Remus said, he looked wrecked, deep circles under his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” James said.

“What’s wrong?” Remus asked. “Anything you want to talk about?”

James considered it. If there was anyone in the house that he could trust it was Remus, but at the same time, he felt like if he tried to explain how he was feeling, he would end up throwing up or perhaps losing his mind. The latter might happen regardless.

“James?”

“Oh, sorry. No, I think I’ll just go to bed,” James said.

Remus frowned, but after a beat of silence, left, shutting the door as he went. James still didn’t have a wand, he’d been meaning to ask Sirius or Remus to help him get one, but that seemed like a fool’s errand now. He wished he had a wand though because he would very much like to silence the room and scream for a few hours. Instead, he threw himself onto the bed, still in his clothes, and laid very still like he was hiding.

He didn’t sleep. He could feel time ticking passed, and eventually, he could see light beyond his eyelids, but he didn’t sleep. He tried not to think of Regulus, but he failed that challenge

every couple of minutes. He didn't leave his room until the sun was fully up and he could hear someone moving around the kitchen.

He walked down there slowly, not bothering to change his clothes. Bustling around the kitchen was Remus. He didn't look like he'd slept much either.

"Morning," he mumbled. "Tea?"

"Please," James responded.

It was a long morning of silence. Sirius didn't come downstairs until it was almost noon, his hair sticking up at odd angles. Remus and James had been sitting across from each other at the kitchen table in morose silence, so Sirius's arrival seemed to shake them both.

"Harry up yet?" Sirius asked. He sounded like nothing was wrong like he was completely fine.

"Not yet," Remus answered after a beat.

Sirius grabbed a muffin from a pile of them that Remus had baked that morning and then left the kitchen without another word. James wanted to say something, but he didn't know what to say. He felt like he'd been hollowed out like he was just a shell.

"You should probably shower," Remus said suddenly.

"Huh?" James asked. He had still been staring at the closed door that Sirius had left through.

"You kind of... stink."

James looked down at his rumpled clothes that he'd put on yesterday morning, when things were still okay, and sighed. "Right, yeah, good idea." He was so tired.

"James," Remus said softly. James paused to look at him. Remus was watching him with a sort of quiet contemplation. "It'll be all right. Just give him time."

James appreciated it, but at the same time, he'd seen the way Remus and Sirius had been falling apart over the last few weeks. "You know it's possible to give someone too much time, right?"

Remus's eyebrows raised slightly. "I don't know if that's true."

James wanted to argue with him. He wanted to bang his head against the table in frustration, but he was too tired, too burnt out. He left without saying anything. He took a very long shower, using the hot water until the pipes began to rattle, the magic within them struggling to maintain the constant heat. He toweled off half-heartedly, then collapsed into bed fully naked, finally succumbing to sleep.

When he woke again, the sun was setting. He'd slept the entire day away. He could hear the distant noises in the kitchen again. Noises really carried in the old house. He crawled out of bed slowly, wondering if he was just a glutton for punishment even as he dressed and headed

back down the stairs. Just back and forth and back and forth. That felt like all his life was now.

He was about to head into the kitchen when he noticed Sirius and Remus talking quietly to each other a bit down the hallway. Sirius and James made eye contact for a split second before James turned quickly and headed into the kitchen. He didn't know what they were talking about, but if they were talking at all, then he was more than happy about it and he wasn't going to interrupt them.

"Yeah, I'll be back later tonight," Harry said. He nearly barreled into James as he was trying to leave the kitchen just as James entered. "Oh, erm, sorry. I'm off. I'll — We can —" He glanced uneasily at the only other person in the room, the person that James was too afraid to look at yet, then smiled awkwardly and left.

James watched him go, he felt like people were always rushing away from him now. It wasn't a feeling he liked. He couldn't even bear to take a breath, didn't think his lungs would allow the air in, as he slowly looked to the other side of the room where Regulus was watching him with a carefully blank expression.

They stared at each other like two wild animals unsure if the other one would attack.

"You're awake," James said carefully.

"So are you," Regulus responded in a dry voice.

"Fun night?" He tried to keep his voice even and disinterested. Regulus gave him a triumphant smile that sent a shiver up his spine.

"Spectacular," Regulus said. His white teeth glinted in the candlelight as he said it, making him look like a vampire about to attack its prey.

James felt rage surging through him, along with distant arousal that he was trying to ignore. "You know Harry was really worried about you."

The triumphant look vanished from Regulus's face as his jaw clenched. "How are you here?"

He didn't think he meant at Grimmauld. "When you were brought back from the veil, I came back too," James said simply.

"That's what Harry said, but it doesn't make sense," Regulus responded.

"Why not?"

"Why would you follow me out?"

James tilted his head. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I asked Remus why this had happened. Sirius refused to explain, but Remus showed me that stupid book."

“Which book?” James asked before abruptly remembering. *Oh* .

“Why are you here, James? How?”

“I don’t know, the Unspeakables didn’t know either, I’m not sure that book was right.” He hated that he wished it was real. He knew the idea of soulmates was silly, but he wanted to be attached to Regulus in that way.

Regulus’s eyes narrowed. “No, I’m sure it wasn’t. Otherwise, it would have been you and someone else, right?”

“What do you mean?” James asked though he understood it completely, he just needed to buy a little time, he needed to get his feet under him.

“Why do you care what I did last night? It’s not any of your business.”

James was confused by the non-sequitur. “What if I want it to be my business?” He had to push down the jealousy to say it, but he could still hear it in his words.

Regulus scoffed, true anger showing on his face for the first time. At least it was something, James thought. His whole body was vibrating like adrenaline was flowing through every vein in his body

“You lost that right when you left me, remember?”

James clenched his teeth but didn’t respond. He hated the way anger filled him, he didn’t want to feel angry by that.

“Nothing to say to that?” Regulus challenged. “Or was that not it? No, I suppose for you it was when you started dating your *soulmate* . I know with me you just felt so *empty* .”

He’d expected Regulus to remember parts of their last conversation, but now he wondered if it played over and over in his mind as it did for James. He had only wanted him to move on, he wanted him to find happiness, he didn’t think it was worth it now that he could see the emotion in Regulus’s eyes.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” James mumbled.

“Why not?” Regulus asked with a mean smile.

“Because it wasn’t true.” He took a deep breath. “There was no option but to tell the truth. I just said that so you would send me away. I didn’t want you trapped with some ghost, I wanted you to be free.”

Regulus’s eyes twitched. “Excuse me?” he said darkly

“Lily and I weren’t soulmates, we had things in common — like our patronuses — but we weren’t soulmates. Actually, we were going to —”

“Wow,” Regulus interrupted. “She really was worthless to you.”

James blanched. “Don’t talk about her like that.”

Regulus had a victorious spark in his eye. “Why not? If what you just said is true, then she was nothing but a pawn to you.”

“She wasn’t just a pawn,” James said loudly.

“Oh, you cared about her?” Regulus said mockingly. “Cared so much that you used her as a weapon against me?”

James recoiled. “No, I wasn’t — I didn’t —”

“You did,” Regulus snarled.

“Well, I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry.” He said it honestly, but the anger and distress he felt from what Regulus had just said about Lily made the word sound oddly condescending to James’s ears.

Regulus scoffed again, rolling his eyes dismissively. “What do you want from me, James?” James used to love the way Regulus said his name.

“I just want the chance to talk to you. I’m sorry for what I said, but things are different now,” James said.

“How?”

“What?”

“How are they different?” Regulus asked stiffly.

“Well, I’m not dead, for one.”

“No, James. Not how are they different from when you were dead, how are they different from the last time you left me.”

“I —” He couldn’t say that he shouldn’t have left him, he didn’t know that he felt that way. How could he rationalize staying with someone who had chosen Voldemort’s side?

“Nothing has changed,” Regulus said

“Of course, things have changed, you’re different.” It wasn’t what he meant to say, or it at least came out wrong, but it wasn’t exactly untrue. The Regulus he used to know wouldn’t have spent years watching out for Harry, protecting Sirius with his life. He used to be angry, hurt, and at his worst, naive and cowardly. James loved him in spite of it, but that didn’t change the facts. He was a different person now, despite his flaws as a teenager, he had grown into a good man. Someone who was brave and caring. James didn’t get a chance to say any of that though, not that he thought he would be able to if he tried, because Regulus’s eyes turned icy with rage.

"I'm different?" he asked. "Different than the Death Eater you abandoned?" He let out a mirthless laugh, then ripped up his shirt sleeve to reveal the Dark Mark that was burned into his skin, it was raised slightly and bright red around the edges. It looked extremely painful. James flinched when he saw it, unable to shake away the memories of seeing that symbol above the houses of muggles and muggleborn wizards. "See?" Regulus snarled. "I'm no different."

"That doesn't define you," James said dazedly. "You're not like the rest of them."

"No? Did you know that my little cousin has been recruited to the Dark Lord's side?" James wasn't sure who he was referring to at first before he remembered Remus's vague reference to Narcissa's son. "He's been casting Unforgivables on people, can you believe that? A sixteen-year-old throwing around the Imperius Curse like it's nothing."

"That's terrible. You have to stop him," James said without thinking.

"I helped him," Regulus snapped. James pulled back at the venom of his words. "I obliterated them so they wouldn't know the crimes committed against them. I protected him."

"Oh," was all James could respond. He was overwhelmed, having lost his footing long ago

"Not like other Death Eaters, am I? I killed a woman. I snapped her neck with my teeth and buried her in the forest so she would never be found. And you know what?" James shook his head faintly. "I don't even feel guilty about it. I am *exactly* like them." He bared his teeth as he snarled it, watching as James stared at him in shock, then stalked forward and shoved James out of the way as he left the kitchen.

James stood frozen in place, incapable of moving or reacting. There was buzzing in his ears that made him feel like nothing around him existed. It took him a long moment to realize someone was speaking to him.

"James? James, are you all right?" Remus said. He came into focus only a few inches from James's face. James's knees abruptly gave out, and it was only Remus's quick movement that kept him from crashing to the ground.

Remus lowered him gently, keeping his hands firmly on James's upper arms as if trying to ground him.

"They both hate me," James breathed.

"No, James."

"They're never going to forgive me. Harry doesn't want to talk to me. Sirius can't even look at me. And Regulus — Reg — I hurt him so badly."

"Harry does want to talk to you," Remus said pleadingly. "Sirius will get over it, he's just hurt, but give him some time. He loves you, he just needs a bit of time."

James shook his head, fat tears spilling out of his eyes and blurring his vision. "Regulus..."

“Take a deep breath,” Remus said.

James hadn’t realized that he was hyperventilating until his vision began to darken.

“It’ll be okay. James, you need to relax.”

“He’s never going to forgive me.”

the horcrux part II.

Sirius and Remus were right outside the kitchen looking shocked when he rushed through the door. He sneered at both of them thoughtlessly, then sprinted up the stairs as fast as his legs would carry him. He'd felt sick all day, hungover despite the potions Sirius had given him. Harry had come into his room mid-afternoon to bring him some food, and Regulus could tell that he was holding something back, probably keeping himself from asking questions about James. He was too tired to press him on it though, letting the conversation rest for a future date.

He realized as the sun was just beginning to set that he'd stayed in bed all day avoiding James who was living in *his* house. Ridiculous. So he finally stopped hiding in bed and got up to find the others. He should have known James would find him right away, right as Harry was heading to go see Ron. They'd seen each other yesterday, and Regulus didn't understand why they needed to see each other again, but he wasn't going to tell him no. If Harry wanted to spend time with his friends, then Regulus was going to let him.

In all honesty, he'd probably let Harry do anything he wanted at this point. Now that he knew...

His fight with James was just as painful as he thought it would be, every awful thought and insecurity bared for James's stupid perfect eyes to bear witness to. He hated that James got to see him lose control like that. All he wanted was to see him again, and now he was here right after Regulus had received the worst news of his entire life. Why did he have to show up now? Looking perfect and handsome and a bit too skinny. Apologizing for their last conversation like any words could undo the demolishment of everything that mattered. And right after Snape had told him —

"Fuck!" he shouted frantically. He was back in his bedroom, having run there after his fight like an animal trying to burrow to safety, and he quickly threw a silencing spell up around him so that everyone in Grimmauld didn't hear what he was about to do. He bent over at the waist and let out a blood-curdling scream that tore through him so violently that it half turned into a growl.

He stood up fully and without thinking, started throwing violent spells around the room indiscriminately. *Bombarda, Congringo, Incendio, Sectumsempra*. One right after the other until his fingers were buzzing and his room was destroyed. The door to his bedroom opened, and he glanced over sharply to see Sirius standing there looking deeply confused.

Regulus made an uncontrollable choking sound, he wasn't sure what caused it, but he couldn't stand to be in his destroyed bedroom for another second. He shoved passed Sirius and started moving up the stairs toward the window at the top floor that led to the roof. It was Sirius's favorite place to hide when he was kid, Regulus was always too afraid of heights to enjoy it.

He didn't care about heights anymore. He would be so lucky to have such a plebeian fear as heights. The air was icy when it connected with his skin, it was drizzling just slightly, so cold that it might turn to snow at any moment. Regulus didn't care. The cold soothed the burning he felt inside him. He tipped his head back and let it cover his face, breathing heavily. He heard the window seal creak and then a single step as someone followed him outside.

"I'm really not in the fucking mood for a lecture," Regulus said as sharply as he could manage, he wanted it to cut whoever heard it.

"I don't know what you think I'm going to lecture you about," Sirius said. There was a smirk in his voice, a tiny little enjoyment at Regulus's misery.

Regulus lowered his head and opened his eyes to see Sirius gazing out at the London neighborhood around them. "What do you want, Sirius?" Would he yell at him for the way he'd spoken to his friend? He wasn't sure that he could stop himself from throwing him off the roof if he did so.

Sirius glanced at him quickly before looking away, then laughed. It was nearly a giggle. "Who did you kill?"

"What?"

"I heard you bragging in there," Sirius said, still laughing. "You killed someone with your teeth and *didn't even feel bad*. So who did you kill 'O Great Murderer?'"

"Oh, for the love of — can you not make fun of me right now?" Regulus asked, though his lips twitched against his will.

"What would you rather I do? Cower in fear?" Sirius said mockingly.

"It might help a bit," Regulus said through gritted teeth. He would *not* laugh at Sirius's stupid jokes, he would not.

"Oh no, please! Don't kill me with your teeth! Please, someone save me from this very scary teenage Death Eater!" Sirius was shouting so loudly that if they weren't shielded in a hundred years worth of wards, every muggle within a few blocks would have heard them.

"All right," Regulus said, finally losing his battle and laughing at Sirius's antics. "Enough, you're going to wake the neighbors."

"Let them wake," Sirius said. "How else are you going to get your obliviation fix?"

Regulus let out a deep belly laugh, embarrassment making his face grow hot, he couldn't stop the laughter now, couldn't help but revel in his own idiocy. Then without meaning to, his laughter abruptly turned to tears, tears that had been right below the surface since Slughorn's party.

"Oh, Reggie," Sirius said, his voice impossibly soft. "It's going to be okay."

Regulus sank to the roof beneath him, curling his legs up against his chest as his tears turned to sobs, loud and messy. He could feel Sirius's arm resting across his shoulders, a comfort he hadn't expected to ever feel.

"I won't pretend to understand what's going on between you two," Sirius said quietly once Regulus's sobs morphed into tiny hiccups and sniffles. "But you'll — I don't know — you'll find a way to work it out."

He sounded so unbothered by it all. Regulus didn't often imagine how Sirius would react to the news of his and James's relationship, but when he did, Sirius was never this level-headed.

"You're reacting very reasonably to this discovery," Regulus mumbled.

"That you two dated?" Sirius asked. Regulus nodded. Sirius let out a quiet sigh. "I'll admit, I'm not happy that you both lied to me... And that Remus lied about it. And Lily. And Harry. I mean really you told Harry and you never told me? Do you really think so little of me?"

"No," Regulus corrected. "I don't think little of you. I didn't think you would be happy knowing my relationship with James. He was always your person, I figured you would feel like I was taking him from you or something." Then quietly, his insecurity took control and whispered, "Or that you'd be upset because I wasn't good enough for him."

Sirius was quiet for a moment, he seemed to be mulling over everything Regulus had said, and Regulus was just beginning to feel embarrassed about it when Sirius replied.

"I would have wanted James to be happy, and if that meant being with you, then I would have been happy about it."

"Really?" Regulus asked disbelievingly. "I know you cared about Lily."

"My friendship with Lily was completely separate from her relationship with James," Sirius said. "Besides, I would have wanted you happy too. I —" He clicked his tongue awkwardly, shook his head once, then said, "I missed you a lot, not that I would have admitted it back then, but if I had known all I needed to do was dangle my best friend in front of you and you'd come running, I probably would have done it. Especially knowing he was just as desperate for it."

They cringed in unison, Regulus letting out a tiny chuckle despite himself. He couldn't help but think that James probably would have liked being dangled on a stick for Regulus to chase.

"It's still weird," Sirius said, "but I'm not mad about you two. I just wish you would have told me." He glanced at Regulus. "I understand why you didn't, but that doesn't make it hurt any less."

Regulus smiled for a split second before it fell. "He couldn't have saved me," he whispered.

"What?" Sirius asked, jolting slightly.

“James. He couldn't have saved me. After I came back, I never told you because I didn't want you to blame him for my death,” he said, so quietly that the words were nearly carried off in the wind. “He left me, but I was pushing him away long before that. All you had of him was memories, I didn't want to taint those.”

Sirius looked shocked, his eyes disturbingly misty. He swallowed once. “It feels like a betrayal,” he said. It felt like it was his turn to confess, to shell out a piece of himself in return for what Regulus had just offered.

“That I didn't tell you?” Regulus asked.

“No, I understand you, I think I would struggle to tell you if everything was reversed, but it feels like a betrayal that James didn't tell me.”

“And that Remus and Lily didn't,” Regulus added, realizing a second too late that he probably wasn't helping. Sirius nodded anyway.

“I feel like none of them trusted me.”

Regulus as a general rule didn't spend a lot of time thinking about Sirius's feelings and the way all the terrible things he'd been through might have affected him, but for a man who was falsely imprisoned for more than a decade to feel like his closest friends didn't trust him, it must have been excruciating.

“James spent at least half of our time together trying to convince me to talk to you. He's always cared about you, probably more than he ever cared about me.” He didn't say it self-deprecatingly, he wasn't hurt by it, it just felt like the truth. “I didn't know everything about him, but I know for certain that there was never a part of James that didn't trust you.”

Sirius looked distant as if he was reliving something he didn't want to relive.

“You should just ask him why he didn't tell you,” Regulus said. “I asked him not to, but he probably had his own reasons not to as well.” After a beat, he added, “I can't speak to Remus and Lily. Especially Lily, considering I never knew her. But I doubt Remus cares about anyone in this house even a quarter as much as he cares about you.”

He hated saying it, he really didn't want to be involved in Sirius and Remus's troubled relationship, but he could see his brother suffering, and he'd already caused so much pain that night that he didn't want to cause any more.

“Are you going to... get back together with him?” Sirius asked suddenly.

Regulus laughed mirthlessly. He felt like he was being stabbed through the heart with a spear. James was the least of his worries, and at the same time, he couldn't stop picturing his look of horror when Regulus showed him the dark mark. He was no doubt disgusted by Regulus, rightfully so.

“How much did you hear of our conversation?” Regulus whispered.

“Just the tail end,” Sirius said. “I was distracted.” Regulus nodded. So he probably didn’t know about the mark. That was a small blessing. “I didn’t realize he had hurt you so badly.”

Regulus shrugged. “It wasn’t that bad,” Regulus said.

Sirius huffed. “And that’s why you’re crying on the roof, is it?”

Regulus bit his lip. He was at risk of breaking into tears again, but it wasn’t because of James. No, James was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He looked subtly at his brother, his face was surprisingly relaxed, his hand on Regulus’s back, subtly rubbing circles between his shoulder blades, like he used to when they were very, very little. If he could trust anyone, not with his own secrets, but with Harry’s safety, it was Sirius.

Regulus turned his head forward so he wouldn’t have to see Sirius’s reaction to his next words.

“Harry is a Horcrux,” Regulus whispered.

Sirius’s hand froze. “What?” he said quietly.

“The Dark,” he cleared his throat, “You-Know-Who had already killed people that night. His soul was already fragmented, when his Killing Curse backfired, a piece of soul broke off and attached to Harry.”

Sirius removed his hand from Regulus’s back, Regulus regretted its absence. It felt like the only thing keeping him on Earth.

“What are you saying?” Sirius asked, anxiety trickling in, much slower than it had for Regulus.

“A piece of You-Know-Who lives in Harry. As long as he—” he squeezed his eyes shut painfully. “As long as Harry survives, the Dark Lord cannot die.”

Sirius was deadly quiet, not a sound escaping him. Regulus didn’t bother correcting his use of the Dark Lord’s title, he’d forgotten that Sirius hated when he used it, but it hardly mattered now.

“Who told you this?”

Regulus shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I know it to be true.”

Sirius sighed, long and low, before settling back into a silence that felt all-encompassing. They sat next to each other, two asteroids floating out in space, unattached and untethered. The rain turned to snow, and Regulus’s fingers turned numb. He couldn’t care less. Let the December cold take every piece of him.

“What are we going to do?” Sirius said after such a long time that Regulus had all but forgotten that he was even alive, let alone that his brother was next to him.

“We’re going to run.”

Eventually, it was too late in the night to remain up on the roof. They both walked back downstairs without speaking, the house was quiet. It felt so empty. Regulus mindlessly walked to Harry's room, Sirius's old bedroom, and cracked open the door to see Harry sleeping peacefully in bed. He let himself watch Harry sleep for a long moment before silently shutting the door and heading to bed.

Harry woke him with a quiet knock on the door the next morning, saying, "Regulus, are you awake yet?"

Regulus grunted, he'd slept so hard that he hadn't had a single dream. It was a blessing. "Yeah, you can come in."

Harry walked in, giving him a curious look as he did so. "It's late, why are you still sleeping?" He closed the door behind him after entering. "You weren't out drinking again were you?"

Regulus chuckled. "No, it was just a late night." He sat up slowly as Harry came to sit next to him. He looked nervous, and Regulus felt a hint of nervousness.

"Are you upset that my dad is here?" Harry asked softly.

"Why would you ask me that?"

Harry shrugged. "I didn't know if that's why you were up so late, or why you went out drinking?"

Regulus sighed. "No, I'm not upset that he's here." Harry gave him a keen look like he didn't quite believe him. "Or history is complicated, but that doesn't mean I'm not glad that he's alive." He paused, then said, "How do you feel about it?"

"Weird," Harry said honestly. "Really weird. It's weird that he just showed up, and my mum wasn't even with him." Regulus cringed slightly.

"I'm really sorry that she didn't come back too," Regulus said.

"Are you?" Harry asked. His words weren't accusatory, but Regulus flinched nonetheless.

"Of course," Regulus said. "I've never had anything against Lily. Her and James — they were meant to be, I accepted that a long time ago. I'm sad that you'll never get to meet her, and I'm sad that now James has to live without her."

He was surprised to find that he was telling the truth. He really was sad about that. Even as every thought of James with Lily cut into him as if to drain him of his blood, the thought of James grieving his wife caused him just as much pain. He didn't want him to be in pain. Though he'd lashed out the night before, he didn't want to punish him just because he loved someone else. It was hardly his fault. Besides, Regulus wasn't sure he would choose himself over Lily if given the option, he couldn't blame James for doing the exact same thing.

"I don't think that's true," Harry said.

“What?” Regulus asked, shaking himself from his thoughts.

“That they were meant to be.”

“Harry, of course, they were meant to be. They loved each other, and without them, you would have never existed.”

“I’m sure they loved each other, Sirius has told me about them more than once.” He shook his head fondly. “But if they were really meant to be, then why is my dad here and my mum isn’t?”

Regulus swallowed. “I don’t know the answer to that.”

“I just don’t want him to upset you,” Harry said. Regulus laughed a little, that ship had sailed hours ago, but Harry didn’t need to know that.

“He won’t,” Regulus said. “You don’t need to worry about me. Besides, your relationship with James has nothing to do with me.”

Harry was quiet for a long moment before whispering, “I need to ask you something.”

“Okay,” Regulus replied curiously.

A slight blush dusted his cheeks, and Regulus furrowed his eyebrows. “How did you know that you liked my dad?”

“What do you mean?”

The blush grew much darker. “How did you know that you liked him? You know — *liked* him?”

“Oh!” Regulus said. If he had to guess what Harry’s question would be, he would have never guessed this. “Well, I’m not sure.” He searched his memories, brushing past all the heartache and yearning he’d experienced since their relationship had ended. “I guess it sort of snuck up on me. When we first started talking I just found him endlessly annoying.”

Harry laughed, a little sparkle in his eyes as he stared straight ahead.

“The truth is James wasn’t like anyone I’ve ever met. He kept spending time with me even as I tried to push him away. He was warm and comforting. More than that, he saw who I was, not just who others wanted me to be — even myself, I had a skewed view of myself that James saw through easily. I don’t think there was just one moment where I knew I liked him, it just happened a little at a time.”

Harry nodded, but his smile from earlier had faded into a troubled frown.

“What’s wrong?” Regulus asked.

He opened his mouth to say something, then shook his head softly and clicked his teeth together. “I was just curious,” Harry said.

Regulus watched him carefully, waiting for him to continue, but Harry didn't say anything else. "You know you can trust me with anything, right? I would never judge you."

Harry gave a strained smile. "I know that," he said.

Regulus was going to ask him again what he was thinking, but a knock at the door interrupted them. "Come in," Regulus called.

"Morning," Sirius said groggily. He looked around the room curiously when he walked in, a confused look on his face. He turned back to Regulus and finally seemed to notice Harry sitting next to him.

"I can't believe I was the first one awake this morning," Harry said jokingly.

"Yeah, honestly, something is wrong with you," Sirius joked back with an easy grin. "I think Remus is up making breakfast now if you're hungry."

"Starving," Harry said in agreement and all but leapt off the bed.

"We'll meet you down there," Sirius said right as Harry reached the door.

"All right," Harry called over his shoulder, seemingly unbothered.

Sirius turned back to Regulus, a deep line between his eyebrows. "You did a good job fixing up your room last night, I figured it would take you a few days."

Regulus tilted his head to the side for a second before he remembered. "Oh, I forgot I destroyed my room," he said faintly. He looked around in confusion, his bedroom looked immaculate. "Maybe Kreacher fixed it up."

"Speaking of Kreacher, why doesn't he listen to me anymore? You're not plotting against me, are you?"

Regulus must have blanched noticeably because Sirius looked surprised.

"You're not really?"

"No," Regulus said with an uncomfortable laugh. "No, I'm not. But I did tell Kreacher to make himself scarce."

"Why?"

Regulus shook his head. "Can we not talk about it? I have more than enough to worry about without bringing Kreacher into it."

Sirius gave him a questioning look but eventually shrugged. "Fine. We need to talk about what you said last night."

"Do we have to?" Regulus mumbled.

“What did you mean about us running?” Sirius asked, his arms crossed tightly over his chest.

“I felt like I was pretty clear,” Regulus responded. He felt stupid sitting in bed, so he climbed out and stood across from Sirius. He put a silencing spell up, it wouldn’t do for anyone to overhear them.

“You want to run?” Sirius asked, his voice accusing.

“What is the other option? We let Harry die?” Regulus said through clenched teeth, he could feel adrenaline flowing under his skin, his heart rate already picking up.

Sirius flinched. “There has to be something else.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t think that there is,” Regulus said. Sirius’s face grew deathly pale.

“Dumbledore knows about this?” he whispered. Regulus nodded. “How long has he known?”

“I don’t know,” Regulus said. “But that’s not the point. Dumbledore wants to kill the Dark Lord, and Harry cannot live while that happens.” He paused briefly. “There’s a prophecy.”

“A prophecy?” Sirius asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Regulus said. “What matters is that I’m not going to let the Dark Lord kill Harry. I’m keeping him alive, with or without your help.”

Sirius’s eyebrows raised dangerously. “And you’re prepared to sacrifice everyone else to do that?”

Regulus could practically hear the words Sirius wasn’t speaking: *coward, coward, coward*. He swallowed harshly. “We can take them with us.” He looked away from his brother, biting the inside of his cheek so hard that it started to bleed. “I cannot let Harry die, do you understand that? I will do anything to keep him alive.”

Sirius’s arms dropped to his sides as he let out a heavy breath. He hung his head forward, his hair falling to cover his eyes. “I understand,” he murmured.

Regulus relaxed slightly. “So you’ll help me?” Then something occurred to him. “I could stay,” he said. “I could stay here, continue to fight him, find and destroy the other Horcruxes. You guys could try to find a way to destroy the Horcrux inside Harry, somewhere else, somewhere far away and safe.”

Sirius looked up, his face a mask of torment and regret. “We can’t do this alone.”

Regulus was just glad that he didn’t object to him staying. He didn’t want to tell anyone else, but he could see from the firmness on Sirius’s face that he would lose any battle he waged on the topic. “I won’t let Harry die,” he repeated.

“You don’t think they also want him to survive?”

“You’re all Gryffindors,” Regulus said, the words coming out angrier than he expected them to. “You might start getting ideas about *sacrifice* and *glory*. I won’t let Harry fall prey to it. He’s a kid, he’s barely had a chance to live. I won’t — The Dark Lord cannot have him.”

“Sacrifice and glory,” Sirius said with a mean smirk. “Like you didn’t just offer to stay behind and fight Voldemort on your own.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “It hardly matters what happens to me,” Regulus said. “I’m not much of a sacrifice, and I could live a hundred lifetimes and never achieve an ounce of *glory*.” He said the word with a sneer.

“You’re wrong,” Sirius said stiffly, a deep frown on his lips. “But I... I agree that leaving might be the only option.” Regulus relaxed even further, every one of his muscles giving out all at once. He was just lucky to stay standing. “We won’t be able to do it without Remus and James.”

Regulus finally nodded in agreement. “I know,” he said, if only because he knew Sirius wouldn’t be able to leave them behind. He wouldn’t be able to steal Harry out from under them. “You have to promise that you’ll do everything to keep him alive.”

Sirius nodded. “I will.”

Regulus wanted a chance to talk to James just the two of them, if only to ask him not to share all the details of their conversation with anyone. He didn’t get a chance though before Sirius called a family meeting.

“Do you have to call it a family meeting?” Regulus whispered.

Sirius shrugged. “Why shouldn’t I? We’re family, James is practically my brother, and Remus is — well — Remus.”

“I really don’t say this to be a dick, but could you refrain from calling James your brother. Other than the fact that it’s a bloody insult to me — your *real* brother — it also makes it seem like he and I are related.”

Sirius laughed loudly. Regulus rolled his eyes in irritation. Of course, Sirius would find that hilarious. They were inside the library waiting for Remus and James to join them. Regulus had scarfed down breakfast that morning, finishing just as Ron came through the floo.

“Morning,” Sirius had greeted him.

“Hey,” Ron said, already grabbing a plate of food. Regulus wondered if he’d already eaten at home and was just there to take advantage of the extra food, not that he blamed him for it, it was hard to get enough to eat with so many brothers home for Christmas.

“I hope it’s okay that I invited him over,” Harry said quickly. “I thought he could meet my dad.” He looked awkward as he said it, like the words ‘my dad’ still felt weird on his tongue. Regulus was a bit surprised that Harry had told his friend about it right away, though he

guessed that it helped him to feel less uncomfortable. He was very curious about what James would think of Ron.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Sirius said. “Though we probably shouldn’t tell that many people, not until we decide what we’re going to do.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Ron said solemnly. His seriousness was only partially ruined by the amount of unchewed food he had in his mouth.

“I know,” Sirius said with a low laugh.

They retired to the library right after eating. Sirius had told Remus to meet them there and to grab James once he’d had a bit of time with Harry and Ron. Regulus didn’t love stealing James away from them, and he nearly suggested leaving James out of their planning altogether, but Sirius seemed set on including him.

“Hey,” Remus greeted softly as he walked into the library. “James will be down in a minute.”

“Good,” Sirius said.

“Is everything okay?” Remus asked. He didn’t even look at Regulus, his eyes were only for Sirius. Sirius stared back at him, worrying his lip so harshly that it looked like it might start bleeding. Sirius very subtly shook his head. Remus took one step toward him before pausing, his face pained.

James entered the room before any of them could say anything else. He smiled uncomfortably and shut the door behind him. Regulus silenced it without a second thought. No one could know what they were about to discuss. No one.

“What’s wrong?” Remus asked. James gave him a sharp, worried look.

Sirius turned to Regulus, a question and a request in his eyes. James would need to be caught up.

“James,” he said. It was painful to look at him, but he forced himself to meet his eyes. He didn’t like the fear he saw reflected back at him. “What do you know about Horcruxes?”

the wand.

It didn't take nearly as long as Regulus thought it would to get James up to speed about the Horcruxes. He seemed to take most of the news fairly well. When Regulus first explained what Horcruxes were, James simply nodded and said, "Sounds like something Voldemort would do."

When they finally arrived at the detail of Harry being one of Voldemort's Horcruxes, Regulus tripping over his words the entire time, James's eyebrows furrowed.

"Is there a way to remove it?" he asked, his voice level and even like this wasn't the worst thing that could possibly happen to them. Remus looked pale, his hands shaking as he crouched on the floor. Sirius just looked dazed, his eyes distant as he stared blankly at a wall of books.

"The only way to remove a Horcrux is to destroy the vessel it's in," Regulus explained. His voice sounded dead to his ears, he wondered how it sounded to everyone else.

"You want to kill Harry?" James asked, a gasp punching out of his chest.

Up until that point, Regulus had felt bad about snapping at James the day before, James didn't deserve the anger Regulus had thrown at him, but his regret evaporated the moment he heard that question, especially as he witnessed the anger, hurt, and suspicion in James's eyes.

He took one step toward him. "No, you little —" he paused to take a sharp breath in, his legs shaking with the effort of holding him in place. "No one is hurting Harry." The lifelessness was gone from his voice, replaced with a venomous rage that sparked with magic.

James's pupils dilated, the black swallowing up every other color for a moment as his mouth dropped open.

"What do we do?" Remus interjected. The hopelessness in his voice made Regulus's stomach sink, Sirius blinked hard, looking over at Remus with an unreadable emotion. Regulus thought it might be fear or regret.

"Regulus thinks we should run," Sirius said blankly. "And I agree with him."

"You think we should run?" Remus asked. He was asking Sirius as if Regulus wasn't even in the room, but Regulus was still the one who answered.

"Harry won't be safe here," Regulus said.

"He won't be safe anywhere. Voldemort is going to come after him regardless," James said, his voice even again. Regulus didn't know how he was managing to hold in his emotions so well. He'd never thought of James as an even-tempered person, but in retrospect, he thought that James might have been the most well-balanced of all of them.

“No, but if Harry’s out of the country then he’ll be harder to find. At the very least it will give us more time. You-Know-Who cannot be killed, but he can be destroyed. I’ll stay behind, you three take Harry and leave the country.” Regulus couldn’t help but picture Harry’s face as he spoke, how confused and disappointed he would look when they told him they were leaving.

“How? Where would we go? It’s not that easy to leave the country. Plus what about everyone else?” Remus asked.

“We need time to prepare,” Sirius said faintly. “We’ll have to make international portkeys. They can’t be created legally, there are Death Eaters in the Ministry, and they might be able to track us down. As of right now, I doubt any of us know how to make them safely.”

“We could learn,” Regulus said.

“Exactly. We need time,” Remus added. He stood up, the panic drifting away slightly so that he looked more like the man Regulus was used to seeing.

“How much time?” Regulus asked though he knew they were right. It wasn’t like they could run now, there was nowhere to go yet.

“I don’t know,” Remus said.

“We could make another safe house, one that the Order doesn’t know about. It could give us somewhere to hide while we figure things out. Besides we can’t go right this second, Dumbledore is going to look for us.”

“We’re not going to tell Dumbledore?” Remus asked. He didn’t sound sad when he asked it, not exactly, but there was a confused frown there that spoke to his true feelings.

“We’re not telling anyone outside of this room,” Regulus said, aiming to be as clear as possible. “Dumbledore will make whatever choice he has to in order to kill You-Know-Who. As of now, his motivations no longer align with ours.”

Remus looked torn, but he didn’t argue.

“I think we should try to find another way to remove it,” James said. He’d been chewing anxiously on his bottom lip and now it was plump, red, and slick. Regulus got the overwhelming urge to bite down on it. “There must be another option. We just haven’t found it yet.”

“And if there isn’t one?” Regulus asked.

“It’s got to be bothering Harry,” James said, rather than answering. “I can’t imagine that it feels good having a dark wizard’s soul trapped inside you. Even if we successfully run and destroy Voldemort, Harry won’t be able to live forever without consequences. I’m sure of it.”

It was a good point, Regulus thought, and not one that he had considered. James was correct though, the soul fragment had been bothering Harry, Regulus just hadn’t understood what it was that was causing all the issues, and who knew how much worse it could get. He sighed through his teeth.

“I have a plan,” he said. The other three seemed to snap to attention. Though they were already listening, he could feel the energy in the room shift the moment he said those words. “Sirius, you work on getting a safe house in order, somewhere that won’t be found.”

“Maybe one of the old Black properties. I know there are a few by the sea that haven’t been used in a while,” Sirius said thoughtfully. Regulus nodded in agreement. He hadn’t thought about them in years, but there was one they used to visit when they were children, more of a vacation home than anything. He wondered if Sirius was thinking of the same place.

“Remus,” Regulus said. “You work on the portkeys. There has to be a way to make them.” Remus nodded, his eyes already flickering around the library searching for books on the topic. There was bound to be something.

“I’ll work on trying to find another solution to the removing the Horcrux. I’ve done the most research on the subject, I can go back through it. Maybe I missed something.” He tried not to let the despair out into his voice, but it was difficult to manage.

“And what should I do?” James asked, his face hopeful and determined. Regulus could barely look at him.

For the first time since he’d seen James’s face, alive and well, he realized that he was now the youngest among them. Sirius and Remus were well into their thirties, even with Sirius’s stunted maturity due to his extended stay with the dementors, and Regulus was closer to his mid-twenties mentally. James was still twenty-one, only barely an adult. He felt an odd swell of affection and protectiveness build inside him.

“Spend time with Harry,” Regulus said simply. “He deserves a chance to be a teenager and to get to know you. Don’t let on that anything is wrong. I don’t want him to know.”

“Pretty sure he’s going to figure it out once we run away,” Sirius said with a frown.

“I know,” Regulus said. “But as long as Dumbledore is there, Harry is relatively safe at Hogwarts. We’ll let him finish out his sixth year at least, then reassess in the summer.”

“And the others?” Sirius asked. Regulus gave him a questioning look. “Harry’s friends. Won’t they be in danger too?”

“They all will be,” Regulus said quietly. “Which is why I need to find a way to destroy him.”

He couldn’t help thinking about Draco. He wondered how his Christmas was going. He didn’t think that Draco had made any progress on whatever task the Dark Lord had given him, surely Regulus would know if he had. Would the Dark Lord punish him for his failure? Would he finally force him to take the mark? He should have done more for him, should have kidnapped him out from their noses, and hidden him away.

“Reg,” James said softly. Regulus looked up to find that they were alone in the library, Sirius and Remus had left while he was distracted.

“James,” he said softly. Both of them stood frozen feet apart from each other.

“I wanted to apologize,” James said.

Regulus made a choking sound. “No, James, no. You have nothing to — I’m the one who should apologize.”

James looked surprised. “For what?” he asked incredulously.

Regulus gritted his teeth, not in anger but to escape the indescribable feelings welling up inside him. “I shouldn’t have lashed out at you. I’m sorry for what I said about Lily.” He was genuinely regretful about that. Lily had never asked to be pulled into their arguments.

“No, you were right,” James said. “I used her against you and that wasn’t fair. Honestly, I haven’t been fair to you in a lot of ways. I shouldn’t have said that thing about you being different now. Though you are — not better! Just different, more... I don’t know, self-assured.”

Regulus stared at him for a long few moments, unsure of how to respond to him. It was all a bit too much for him honestly. He felt like he was being crushed underneath it all.

“I can’t give you anything,” he said finally, even his voice sounded tired. James looked confused. “I know you must be here for Harry, Sirius, and Remus, and I won’t be presumptuous and assume you’re here for me.” James looked momentarily annoyed, but Regulus continued speaking before he could interrupt. “But if you are, I don’t have anything to offer you. I have — I have nothing.”

He hoped that James understood what he was trying to say, he didn’t know that he had the energy to explain the way he’d been shelled out, the way the last few years had put so much stress on his shoulders that he barely felt human most days. James looked sad, his face softening.

“I don’t need anything,” James said. “Just being in your life is enough.”

His voice was so tender that Regulus felt tears well up in his eyes, though he didn’t fully understand why. He felt almost like he was finally crawling into a huge soft bed after a long and terrible day. He gave James a watery smile, which James returned a bit apprehensively.

“Friends then?” James said quietly.

“Yeah,” Regulus said, relief and disappointment braiding together up his spine. “We can be friends.”

Christmas snuck up on Regulus a few days later. He’d been going back through his research, as he said he would, but there wasn’t anything. He was growing more hopeless by the minute which he felt was truly horrible given how hopeless he felt to start. By the time Christmas day rolled around, he was considering launching a secret attack on the Dark Lord that very morning just to get it over with.

He knew that plan wouldn't pan out the way he wanted it to. There were more Horcruxes out there that weren't living in Harry, and Regulus had no idea how many. He needed the Dark Lord to be at his weakest before he made a move against him.

The days leading up to Christmas were lived in a haze, but there were a few moments that stuck out to him. James was the only thing that could cut through the fog. He seemed to take their newborn friendship truce to heart and would periodically find him throughout the day to talk.

"Harry is worried about you," James said one afternoon.

"What do you mean?" Regulus asked, stretching his neck from one side to the other. It was starting to hurt from the amount of time he was spending reading.

"He says that you have a problem with stress," James said, chuckling. "He thinks I've stressed you out too much."

Regulus smiled softly. "He's not wrong," Regulus replied. "Not about you stressing me out, but I do probably have a problem with stress."

"It's understandable, given everything," James said reasonably. "I wanted to ask you something."

There was a mischievous sparkle in his eye, one that immediately put Regulus on his guard. "What?"

"It's about Sirius and Remus."

"No, I'm not getting involved in that," Regulus said with a loud laugh.

"Come on! They're so pathetic, have some pity," James said pleadingly.

Regulus couldn't stop laughing now. "I don't think they would appreciate hearing you say that about them."

James gave a dismissive shrug, a light smile on his face. "They know how I feel about them. You don't understand. It was so frustrating last time."

"What was?" Regulus asked. He was already turning back to the book he was reading. It was as useless as all the others, but at least it made him feel like he was doing something.

"Getting them together. Sirius told me that he liked Remus in *third year*. Do you know how long I had to listen to him talk about Remus before they finally just started dating? It was driving me up the wall."

"Aww, poor you," Regulus said, snickering when James gave him a playful glare. "They're grown men. I'm sure they can figure it out for themselves. Besides, I have no interest in toying with my brother's love life. Who am I? My mother?"

The playfulness of James's face evaporated in an instant. "Don't joke about that."

“Don’t joke about what?” Regulus asked incredulously.

“Your mother,” James said unhappily. “I know she tried to marry you off to someone. You would never do that to Sirius.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Honestly, it wasn’t that big of a deal. It’s very common for purebloods to end up in arranged marriages. Surely you know this already. I mean, I know your parents were never the type.”

“Just because it’s common, doesn’t mean it’s right,” James said firmly. Regulus shook his head slightly.

“Okay, I won’t joke about it,” he agreed, mostly to get James to drop it. “But regardless, I’m not going to help you get Sirius and Remus back together.”

James groaned. “At least tell me why they’re not dating.”

“Surely they’ve told you themselves unless you haven’t bothered to ask.”

“Oh, I’ve asked,” James said, throwing his hands up in despair. “They both just dance around the topic. Neither of them wants to give me a straight answer. And Sirius is convinced that Remus is in love with someone else, which is just ridiculous considering his new hobby is staring longingly at Sirius.”

Regulus hummed. “That makes sense,” he replied. “What with Tonks and everything.”

“Who is Tonks?”

“Andromeda’s daughter.”

James looked horrified. “Are she and Remus together?”

Regulus shrugged. “No idea. I don’t really talk to the man.” *For this exact reason* was left unsaid, but James seemed to hear it regardless if his subtle glare was to be taken into account.

“That’s horrible,” James mumbled. “He can’t be with someone else.”

“I did ask him to take it elsewhere. It’s obvious that it bothers Sirius.”

“So you do care,” James said accusingly.

“I never said I didn’t care,” Regulus said tiredly. “I just don’t care what the end result is. I have no stake in their relationship, I just don’t want Sirius to suffer.”

James gave him a keen look for a long moment before saying, “Harry told me you’re fake dating someone in his year.”

“Oh, Merlin,” Regulus groaned, giving up on pretending to read and slamming the book shut. “I forgot to end that.”

“End it? So it’s true?” He was laughing as he said it.

Regulus had forgotten about Parvati, he’d forgotten about nearly everything in his life beyond the Horcruxes, but he realized the moment James brought it up that he was dying to talk about it. It didn’t feel right to tell anyone else, but it was easy to tell James. He listened attentively as he explained Lavender and Parvati, Lavender’s chosen crush on Ron, and their subsequent relationship.

“So it was Parvati’s idea to have this fake relationship?”

“Naturally. It’s hardly an idea I would come up with. Not to mention that everyone who knows who I really am thinks it’s weird that I’m dating a child. Harry obviously knows, and I’m sure Ron, Hermione, and Draco do as well. I’m not sure what Luna thinks, but she’s always been more in tune with what’s going on than her peers.”

James laughed again. “Harry had a lot to say about Draco,” James said with an eyebrow raise.

Regulus rolled his eyes subtly. “I’m sure he did,” he muttered. James’s smile widened.

“He thinks you’re protecting him.”

“I am,” Regulus said. “As you already know.” A blush spread across his face rapidly as he remembered their fight. James seemed unbothered though.

“You care about him,” James said. It wasn’t a question.

“He’s just a kid,” Regulus said. “He doesn’t have anyone else there to help him, just his parents, and I doubt that Narcissa or Lucius are going to be very good influences.”

“No, probably not.”

“And it’s not like he has any friends that could watch out for him. He’s not like Sirius. Sirius had you, Remus, and Lily. Who knows what kind of a dickhead he would have grown into had he not had those influences.” He bit the inside of his cheek. “He could have ended up like me.”

“That’s what you think will happen to Draco, isn’t it? That he’ll end up like you.”

“He doesn’t have any more of a choice than I did, even less so because at least I had you for a little bit. He’s in a bad situation. And I know the others hate him because he’s always parroting what Lucius is telling him, but I don’t know.”

“He’s just a kid,” James repeated his words back at him. Regulus nodded. “What’s going on with him?”

“I’m not sure exactly. You-Know-Who has given him some kind of task, but I don’t know what that task is. I can only hope that he’s not being punished because it hasn’t been completed yet.”

“You said he was casting Unforgivables?”

Regulus sighed. “Yes, and please don’t tell anyone about that. Especially Harry. He’s not thinking straight about any of this.”

“He does seem rather obsessed with the boy,” James said, he glanced out the singular dusty window that sat across from them. “What are you going to do about Draco?”

“I was thinking I might kidnap him,” he said matter of factly. James laughed. “I thought about doing it over the summer and talked myself out of it, but if nothing changes by the end of the year, then I’m definitely going to do it.”

“What if he doesn’t want to go?”

“I’ll have to convince him. He’s been helping me for years. Let’s just say that Harry isn’t the only one obsessed.”

James’s eyebrows raised slightly, but he didn’t look fully surprised. They lapsed into silence and eventually, Regulus went back to reading. It was comfortable though, to have James sitting next to him. It reminded him of when they first started talking to each other when James would find him somewhere in the castle and just quietly spend time next to him. Regulus still found it just as comforting as he did back then.

They were invited to the Burrow for Christmas festivities. Sirius, Remus, and Harry all seemed happy enough to attend, but Regulus was quick to bow out.

“We can’t take James with us,” he said to Sirius. “The fewer people that know he exists the better.”

“So you want to stay home with him?” Sirius asked with one raised eyebrow.

“Don’t look at me like that. I could use the extra time to research, it’s not — it’s not about James specifically.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Sirius said. Though Regulus was telling the truth, and he did just want to stay home, his face still grew warm under his brother’s knowing gaze. He couldn’t explain why he felt so much embarrassment about it.

Harry did not take the suggestion of him staying home nearly as well as Sirius had. He seemed upset that he and James would be alone on Christmas, regardless of the fact that they would be with each other and not actually alone.

“Everyone wants to see you, you have to come,” Harry said pleadingly.

“You would rather I leave James here by himself?” Regulus asked.

Harry bit his lip harshly, a frown forming on his face. He looked unsure of himself. “No, I suppose not.” Regulus wondered if he was lying.

They all ultimately agreed to it and after a small celebration with just the five of them on Christmas morning, Sirius, Remus, and Harry all left through the floo to go see the Weasleys.

James was obviously sad to see them go, but he kept forcibly smoothing out his face like he was trying to hide it.

“Well, I’m going to go back to reading,” Regulus said softly. He was already making his way out of the room when James finally replied.

“Actually, I wanted to ask for a favor.”

“Yeah?” Regulus asked.

James seemed to fortify himself. “I need a wand.”

Regulus’s eyebrows furrowed. “Oh, okay. Do you want me to —”

“Remus mentioned that it wasn’t safe to go to the Diagon Alley during the break, but I know there is a shop in Hogsmeade.”

“You think they’ll be open on Christmas day?” Regulus asked. James nodded once. “Why didn’t you ask to go before?”

“Sirius is still upset with me,” James said. “And Remus doesn’t want to do anything to upset him further.”

“They both told you this?”

“Well, no, but they didn’t have to.”

“You and Sirius still haven’t talked?”

“We have,” James said with a helpless shrug. “But I feel like he’s still mad. I just didn’t want to ask them. Will you help me?”

Regulus stared at him for a long moment, before finally agreeing. He thought about calling Kreacher to help them — apparating all the way to Hogsmeade on their own would be difficult — but he still couldn’t bear to look at the elf. There was so much anger and guilt mixed in with his feelings for Kreacher, and he didn’t know how to parse through them. More than once he’d thought about freeing him, if only so he didn’t have to worry about it anymore, but he wasn’t sure if that would be a punishment or not.

Hermione believed that all house elves deserved to be free, but all the house elves he’d ever met acted like that was a fate worse than death. Were they right? He wasn’t sure. He didn’t know who to listen to. Though he’d always felt it was wrong to command a house elf to do something against their will, he didn’t know if freedom was the answer. Although based on his choices in the past, he didn’t think that he was the right one to make the decision either way. He’d never had the firmest moral compass, and looking back, he’d always been a bit naive when it came to things like that.

Regardless, his unwillingness to call Kreacher left him and James on their own. He dressed warmly, knowing that Hogsmeade would likely be dusted in a thick layer of snow, then grabbed James by the wrist and apparated them away. It took three jumps to get there, and

James had to catch him from falling over when they finally landed. His hands were warm even through the gloves he was wearing and all the layers of Regulus's clothing.

For a moment their faces were inches from each other, James's pulled into a worried expression, and Regulus couldn't help but stare. It had been a long time since they'd been so close. After a moment they pulled away, both at the same time, as if realizing that they looked like idiots, standing in the middle of Hogsmeade and gazing at each other.

They traveled quickly to Ollivanders. It was lucky that they had a location in Hogsmeade given the fact that Ollivander himself had gone missing a few months ago. The location in Hogsmeade was run by one of his apprentices. The store looked closed from the outside, but when they pressed on the door, it opened.

Inside, the room was cloaked in shadows, the only sources of light were a few candles seated on the main desk.

"Hello?" Regulus called out. Suddenly a young man jumped out from behind a stack of wands, causing both James and Regulus to jump violently.

"Sorry, sorry. I wasn't sleeping."

"Right," Regulus said slowly.

"How can I help you?" he asked, brushing down the front of his vest which was covered in wrinkles. Regulus looked at James questioningly.

"Oh, I need a replacement wand."

"Of course," the man said. He looked frazzled, his hair sticking up on one side of his head. He strangely reminded Regulus of Neville. He was quick to help James find a new wand and seemed more than happy to not ask questions about who they were or why they were there. It took a while to find one that worked, but eventually, James found one.

Regulus paid quickly and they rushed to leave. Regulus was pretty sure he caught the man lying back down behind the stack of wands just before the door slammed behind them. It was already growing dark outside. James quickly apparated them back to Grimmauld. He was glad that he was able to since Regulus didn't think he could manage it again.

"A bit of a shame that he had to work on Christmas, don't you think?" James asked as they walked in the front door. It was fully dark by the time they got back, and the streetlights were the only thing lighting their way.

"Yeah, although —"

"Ron?" James interrupted to say. Regulus followed his line of sight to see Ron sitting in the hallway with his head between his hands. Regulus rushed forward and knelt next to him, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. Ron didn't move.

"Can you check to see if anyone else is home?" Regulus asked. James nodded quickly and moved deeper into the house. "Ron, can you hear me?"

Ron made a tiny noise but otherwise didn't react. Regulus moved his hand up to Ron's forehead, the only part of his face that wasn't covered by his hands. His skin was cold and clammy.

"Ron," he called again. Ron grunted as if in response, but Regulus couldn't be sure if he was well enough to hear him.

"No one else is here," James said, rushing back to them. Regulus's eyebrows furrowed.

"Help me move him into the living room," Regulus said. "I'll go through and get someone."

They each put a hand underneath Ron's arms and slowly lifted him to his feet. His body responded like he was awake, his feet stepping forward as they guided him, but for some reason, this just put Regulus more on edge. When they made it into the living room, they carefully lowered him onto the couch.

"Stay with him," Regulus whispered. He stood up and walked toward the fireplace, but before he could grab a handful of floo powder, Ron spoke.

"Wait."

Regulus and James both looked at him, then glanced at each other worryingly.

"I have to tell you something," Ron said, lowering his voice to whisper.

Regulus took a tentative step forward. "What do you have to tell me?"

Ron shook his head, letting out a pained groan.

"James, go get a pain potion," he said quietly. James looked torn, but ultimately nodded and hurried out of the room. Regulus took a seat next to Ron, putting a hand on his back. "What do you need to share with me?"

"Your answer."

Regulus's heart skipped a beat. "My answer?"

"Yes." Ron jolted forward suddenly as if he had been punched in the stomach.

"Okay, okay," Regulus said frantically. "What is it? What is my answer?"

"I don't know," Ron replied. He sounded distressed.

"It's okay," Regulus soothed, though his thoughts were already racing. James came back into the living room, a vial in his hand. "Do you think you could drink this for me?" Regulus asked Ron.

Ron shook his head for a second, but stopped abruptly and sat up, finally dropping a hand so that he could grab the vial. It was then that Regulus noticed his eyes. They were discolored as if he'd been using milk as eye drops, though he seemed able to look at James. James just

about dropped the vial, his hand shaking as he gave it to Ron who downed it in a second. His face, which had been held in a distressing tension, relaxed suddenly.

“Are you all right?” Regulus asked after a long moment. Ron gave a very, very slow nod. “Do you still have something to tell me?” He didn’t want to push him, Ron was clearly in pain, but at the same time, he had to know.

“You already have the answer,” Ron said carefully.

Regulus looked at James, though he knew he wouldn’t know either. “What do you mean?”

Ron reached out and gripped his wrist so tightly that Regulus was sure he would bruise. “The answer. You already have it.” His teeth were gritted.

“Okay,” Regulus said quickly. “I understand.”

Ron shook his head harshly. “No, you don’t. The answer. You already have it.”

“What does that mean?” James asked. His face was deathly pale. Regulus shook his head.

“I’m not —” he paused, tilting his head to the side thoughtfully. “Oh.”

Ron blew out a long, grateful breath and fell back against the couch with a heavy *thunk* .

“What is it?” James asked.

“The answer,” Regulus said. “Of course.” He didn’t wait for either of them to speak again, he was already on his feet, rushing out of the room.

the answer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“The answer. Of course.”

Regulus was gone before James could ask what he meant. He turned back to Ron. He was still covered in a thin layer of sweat that made him shine slightly in the candlelight.

“What answer?” James asked him. He didn’t intend to sound so distressed, but his heart was already racing. Something was happening, he could feel the way everything had just shifted, and he hated being left in the dark.

“I don’t know,” Ron said, then yawned so big that his jaw popped.

“How can you not know? You’re the one that came over and said it.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Ron said, shaking his head once. “I’m just gonna —” His words slurred then abruptly cut off as his eyes slid closed. He dropped right into the middle of a deep snore. James threw his hands up in the air.

“What is going on?” he said. He stood up, leaving Ron to his nap, and went in search of Regulus. It didn’t take him long to find him, he was in his bedroom, bent at the waist and digging around in his school trunk. “Regulus?”

Regulus didn’t respond.

“Regulus, what is Ron talking about?”

He once again didn’t answer. James sighed quietly, a sharp feeling in his chest, and walked back out into the hallway. He’d been spending a lot of time recently trying to not get in the way. That was his new motto. Do not get in the way, that’s what he reminded himself constantly.

The thing was that James should have felt comfortable, he should have been happy to be back with everyone, but he felt like something was missing and at the same, he felt like he was an extra piece of a puzzle that was already completed.

James used to think that he could learn anything by hearing about it. When he first became friends with Sirius, he would listen to him talk about his experiences and he would imagine himself going through them. He always thought that was understanding. But now that he was a man, he knew that there were some things he could never understand without experiencing them. Not really.

The people in his life — his family by all accounts — had been through so much, and James didn’t understand any of it. He was trying to, but mostly he just felt lost.

He kept trying to spend time with Harry, to get to know him as he was now and not just as who James thought he would be, but it was difficult to try and push through the walls that Harry had built around him. He knew that Harry hadn't had a good childhood. There was a reason that Regulus, Sirius, and Remus were so protective over him, but he didn't know all the details. And James could tell that any effort on his part to learn those details would just lead to Harry pulling away.

He didn't know what Harry had gone through, and he would never know. Only Harry could know. But at least Sirius, Remus, and Regulus had been there. They'd caught him when he'd needed protection. Of course, James was happy that they were there, but there was a jealousy inside him that festered like a disease. It swelled up like a fever, making him feel like he'd missed a step while climbing the stairs. He was both out of place and unwanted. He lacked the knowledge and understanding to be of use to his son.

So he resigned himself to spending time with Harry and his friend, Ron, as if he were a distant relative who was just visiting for the holiday. He was non-judgmental and kind, even leaving Harry and Ron alone when he felt like he was being overbearing. They never asked him to leave, but he couldn't be sure if they were just being polite. He didn't want to be a burden. He could tell that he made Harry a bit uncomfortable, and though he wanted to know his son, more than anything he wanted to know him, he didn't want to ruin Harry's holiday.

Mostly James was just trying to not make any waves. After Regulus had yelled at him, and he'd broken down in Remus's arms, he'd vowed to get a grip on himself. He didn't want to make anything more difficult for anyone around him.

When Regulus told him about the Horcruxes — the very idea of them made James feel so sick that he felt like he might lose his breakfast — he'd purposefully kept his face clear, he'd kept his voice unemotional. Although he'd lost it for just a moment when he thought Harry might die, he wasn't perfect, he never had been.

Regulus was quick to correct him though, growling out that no one was going to hurt Harry. His sudden vicious attraction to Regulus nearly swallowed him up. He was no longer the boy he'd dated back in Hogwarts. This Regulus was a man, a capable man intent on keeping James's son alive. That moment of arousal had been a bit harder to tamp down on, but he'd finally managed it. Regulus did not want any of the attraction James held for him, and he wouldn't disturb their newfound alliance with it.

When Regulus told him, harrowingly, that he had nothing to offer, James had asked for the only thing he felt would make Regulus's life easier: friendship.

He spent most of his time thinking about Regulus, and when he felt it had been enough time since he'd last spoken to him, he would go through the house to find him. He was almost always bent over a book, a deep line between his eyebrows as he read. James wanted to rub his shoulders, to work out the knots he could see forming beneath his shirt, but he didn't dare touch him.

They were *friends*. James was good at friends. He'd always been good at friends. He wasn't upset about being friends with Regulus at all. He felt very normal about it, in fact.

And if he spent every free moment wondering if Regulus was ready to move on, if Regulus would go out to have sex with another muggle, if he would be forced to watch Regulus fall in love with someone else, then at least no one else had to know. His pain was his own, he wouldn't put it on anyone else's shoulders.

He tried to spend a bit of time with Remus if only to get his mind off of other things, but he seemed too stressed to entertain James for more than a few minutes, so James was left alone. He wanted to spend time with Sirius, but at the same time, he thought about avoiding him altogether. James knew he'd hurt Sirius, and he didn't want to hang around just to be a reminder of that pain, but Sirius was difficult to avoid. So they saw each other, but they didn't spend too much time together, and they didn't talk about anything beyond their current tasks, but he still saw him more than he saw the others.

James was just careful not to overstep. That's all he was nowadays. He was just careful.

He figured he would be alone for Christmas, and he was careful to make sure everyone knew he was fine with that. He didn't want to disrupt their lives. But he was pleasantly surprised that Regulus stayed home with him. He allowed himself one request, the last one he would make, he assured himself. Once he had a wand, he wouldn't have to ask for anything from anyone.

It was all going fine, he had a new wand, and he'd even gotten to spend the afternoon with Regulus. He looked so sharp nowadays, a serious set to his brows that made him look like he always knew exactly what he was doing. He was so controlled, so powerful. James was easily distracted by him.

But then Ron arrived and ruined everything. Perhaps that wasn't fair, but they'd had such an easy time together. It had all been going so well.

James pinched his side harshly, trying to pull himself out of his thoughts. He didn't think that he used to worry about the direction of his thoughts so much. He used to just exist, now it felt like every idea was another train running on poorly built tracks.

He was leaning heavily against the wall opposite Regulus's bedroom door when Regulus came rushing into the hallway. He did a double-take when he noticed James waiting for him. His hair was curling up in unusual directions from where he'd been practically hanging upside down a moment ago. It made him look like one of those muggle mad scientists that existed in the movies Lily would force him to watch.

Regulus blinked confusedly, then shook his head like he was trying to reorder his thoughts by force alone.

"I need to — I have to go."

"What?" James asked. He stayed leaning against the wall. He didn't want to crowd him.

"We can't just use it. I almost died — well, that's not important. But I can't just use it on Harry." Regulus let out an abrupt manic laugh. "No, that's — just, no." He turned away from James, his eyes distant like he wasn't even seeing him, and started heading down the stairs.

James dug his nails into the palms of his hands for just a second, enough sharp pain to ground him, before following. He found Regulus frozen in the living room, staring down at Ron who was still snoring loudly on the couch.

“Should we call for someone?” James asked quietly. Regulus took a deep breath in, his shoulders rising and falling like he was consciously moving them. He didn’t look away from Ron.

“No,” he said, sounding resigned. “We should just let him sleep. I know that must have taken it out of him.”

James paused for a moment, waiting for Regulus to elaborate on anything that had happened that night, and when that elaboration never came, he sunk into himself and took a seat across from where Ron was sleeping. Surely someone would notice that he wasn’t at home anymore. Where was Harry? Wouldn’t he look for Ron eventually?

He wanted to ask Regulus to explain everything, he hated feeling like he was being kept in the dark, but Regulus’s eyebrows were deeply furrowed and he looked worried. James didn’t want to stress him out. Against his chest, Regulus was clutching a few loose pieces of parchment that had scribbled writing on them. He wondered if they contained the answer that Ron had mentioned.

Eventually, Regulus sat as well, next to Ron but far enough that he wouldn’t disturb him, and he started idly reading through the pages he was holding. He didn’t look at James, not once the entire time, and James was careful not to feel too hurt by it. Though he knew logically that his feelings didn’t burden anyone if he didn’t let them out, he still felt guilty every time his feelings were hurt.

Luckily, it wasn’t long before someone did come looking for Ron. It wasn’t Harry though, it was Remus. He came through the floo looking disheveled and deeply worried. He didn’t even get a chance to get a word out before he caught sight of Ron slumbering away.

“What?” he said, sounding dazed. “How long has he been here?”

“About an hour,” Regulus said distractedly.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone? His parents were worried sick.” Remus sounded very much like a professor scolding a student. A frown was etched on his lips, making the wrinkles on his face appear even deeper.

Regulus looked confused for a moment, but then his face cleared. “Sorry,” he said simply.

Remus seemed to be waiting for Regulus to keep speaking, he was just staring straight ahead like he was staring through Remus. Remus looked over at James with a curious head tilt, but James just shrugged. Regulus apparently wasn’t in a talkative mood.

“Why did he come over here?” Remus asked.

“Oh, he, well, there was something...” James said, stumbling over his words awkwardly. “I’m not sure exactly.”

Remus’s eyebrows furrowed deeply. “Okay,” he said slowly. “Well, I’ll be right back. I need to tell them he’s okay.” He walked back through the floo without waiting for a response. The room fell back into silence, the only noise the deep snores coming from Ron. It wasn’t long before Remus, Sirius, and Harry were back though. Remus knelt down in front of Ron and shook him lightly.

“Ron, wake up,” Remus said gently. Ron shook awake looking dazed.

“You probably shouldn’t be in here,” Sirius said. It took James a moment to realize he was speaking to him. “In case someone comes through the floo.”

“Oh, right,” James said with an easy smile, leaving the room quickly. His chest felt so heavy as if someone had placed a huge cauldron on top of him. He felt like someone was crushing his ribs, one at a time, making it difficult to breathe. He leaned against the wall once he knew he was out of sight, then slowly slid down to the ground.

He felt so disconnected. He felt like he was just in the way. Even Sirius — the person he always thought would be with him — didn’t want him around. He took in a sharp breath, trying very hard to level out his heartbeat so that it didn’t gallop out of his chest.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked. James looked up, he hadn’t noticed him leave the living room.

“Oh, yeah, just waiting till they got Ron home,” James said, slowly standing to his feet.

“Right,” Harry said, he didn’t look like he believed him. “Erm, I’m going up to bed. Good night.”

“Night,” James said awkwardly, giving him a small smile as he skirted past. James waited for another long few moments before he looked around the corner back into the living room. Ron was gone, as was Remus, probably going back with him. Regulus hadn’t moved from where he was sitting, but Sirius was looking at him with a deeply confused expression.

Sirius’s eyes drifted up to James when he spotted movement and something flashed over his face that James didn’t understand.

“You can come back in,” Sirius said. He sounded tired but invigorated at the same time. There was a glint in his eyes. He always loved spending time with people, the Weasley household — as Harry had described it — was probably the prime place for someone like Sirius.

“Was Ron all right?” James asked, mostly to be polite.

Sirius nodded. “Seemed to be. Did he *see* something?” He aimed the question at Regulus.

“He did,” Regulus responded. He finally looked at James, his eyes were a bit clearer now as if he’d finally had time to process whatever he was thinking. “Ron is a seer.”

“Oh,” James said. He thought he knew a bit about that, but it was usually just hints and small statements that he didn’t understand. Now they were all falling into place. “He was having a vision?”

“Yeah,” Regulus said with a quick nod. The floo lit up again and Remus came through. He was limping slightly, holding his leg in a way like it hurt to bend his knee. Sirius frowned as he noticed it, before cutting his eyes away like it hurt to look at him. “I’ve figured something out.”

All three of them reacted to the words instantly. Though James had witnessed the entire exchange and Regulus’s franticness, he still felt a zing of excitement at Regulus’s announcement. Remus was in the process of trying to pretend that he wasn’t hurting, but his face instantly settled into seriousness like Regulus was calling a meeting to order. Sirius just froze, his face unreadable.

“Go on,” Sirius said.

“I’d forgotten about it,” Regulus spoke with an undeniable confidence. He was steady. “It’s a ritual I found a few years ago while researching Horcruxes and how to destroy them. I’d given up on it because it nearly killed me last time, but I think it might be the key.”

“It nearly killed you?” Sirius asked. There was a certain shrillness to his voice that reminded James a bit of the first time he’d met Walburga on Platform 9 3/4. He’d been twelve, and they were about to head to their second year at Hogwarts. He’d never seen a woman look so intimidating. James wondered if Regulus could hear it too, that similarity to Walburga.

“Yes,” Regulus said matter of factly. “It nearly killed me. I shouldn’t have done it without researching it thoroughly first, but I was desperate at the time.”

“Can I take a look at it?” Remus asked. Regulus hesitated for only a moment before nodding and handing over the pages. Remus held them out in front of him and both Sirius and James moved to look at them.

James stared at the scribbled writing curiously. *Breiða Sjáflr* was written along the top, followed by what looked like a poem.

“What language is this?” Remus asked. James was wondering that himself, it wasn’t like anything he’d ever seen before.

“Old Norse,” Regulus answered.

“Old Norse? How did you figure that out?” Sirius asked. Regulus flicked his wand and after a moment, three books came flying into his hands. He handed them to Sirius without a word.

Remus peered over Sirius’s shoulder to look at them as Sirius began flipping through the pages.

“These are library books,” Remus said.

“Yes,” Regulus responded simply.

“Muggle library books,” Remus added.

“Yes,” Regulus repeated.

Remus grabbed one from Sirius, passing the pages to James as he did so. James flipped one of them around to find what he assumed was a translation of the Old Norse writing. *Stretch the Self*. What did that mean? It didn’t sound good, that he was certain of.

“How long have you had these books?” Remus asked. He didn’t sound distressed exactly, but there was a derisive quality to his tone like he was disappointed.

Regulus shrugged. “A couple of years, I guess. I’m certain I told Kreacher to take them back to the library, but I didn’t command him to and I guess he decided not to.” His voice lowered to a mumble as he said, “I really shouldn’t be surprised.”

Remus looked appalled. “You’ve had these muggle library books for years? They probably think you stole them. I bet the fees will be exorbitant.”

James gave him a confused look but then noticed Sirius shaking with silent laughter. “I can’t believe that’s what you’re focusing on right now,” Sirius said.

Remus seemed to shake himself, his face turning pink with embarrassment. “I was just saying,” he said. “Obviously it doesn’t matter.”

Sirius was clearly trying to tamp down on the smile that was trying to break free. “Naturally,” he said, before finally turning back to Regulus. “How do you think this will help Harry?”

“It’s an old ritual used to remove a soul from a body. I tried it on one of the Horcruxes, but I wasn’t prepared for the way it would affect me.”

“How did it affect you?” Remus asked. Regulus’s eyes drifted to James for just a second before settling back on Remus.

“It’s hard to explain, but we won’t be able to use it without knowing more about it. I found it in a book that was sent to me anonymously, but I have an idea of where to start looking.”

Sirius jolted slightly. “Wait. So, you’re leaving?”

Regulus nodded once. “I have to. I think — I think there is something here and we have no other options. If I can learn how to use this ritual, I might be able to remove the soul from Harry. I think if I travel to Norway I might have some luck. At the very least, I’m hoping to find the person who sent me the original text.”

“No.”

Sirius, Remus, and Regulus all turned to look at James. He hadn’t even realized that he’d spoken.

“I mean,” he said, glancing around at them awkwardly. He wasn’t supposed to be making waves.

“You mean?” Remus asked, raising both of his eyebrows in question.

James cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I don’t —”

“James,” Regulus said sharply. James did his best not to react. “Say what you need to say.”

“Erm.” James felt like an idiot. “I don’t want you to go.” The silence in the room was palpable.

“Sorry?” Regulus said, sounding vaguely offended.

“It could be dangerous.” Regulus looked even more offended. “And Harry would be upset if you didn’t return to school. You shouldn’t go.”

“You don’t get to decide —”

“Sirius should go,” James added quickly, a solution clicking in his head like it was always there, just waiting for the right moment.

“What?” Regulus growled.

“Oh, so you don’t care what happens to me?” Sirius asked. He surprisingly didn’t sound angry, if anything there was a deep mirth in his voice like this was the most entertained he’d been in weeks. Still, he couldn’t help but hear a sting in Sirius’s words.

James wanted to take a step backward, met with the ire of both Black brothers, but he stood his ground. “And Remus should go with him?”

Remus and Sirius looked at each other for a split second before turning back to James.

“Why?” Sirius said. James opened his mouth to respond, though he wasn’t sure what he was going to say. *Because you need alone time* wasn’t a realistic explanation. To his delight and surprise, Regulus was the one to answer.

“He’s right.” Sirius’s mouth dropped open. “You both have the most experience in the field. I need to stay here with Harry.” Regulus looked at James again, his eyes mischievous and significantly warmer than they were a minute ago. “James can take over some of your research once Harry and I go back to school.”

Sirius sputtered, but Remus only looked thoughtful.

“What about the portkeys?” Remus asked.

“I’ll do research on that,” James said immediately. “And the safe house. I helped the Order with them before, I can do it again.” *I can be useful*, he thought but didn’t say.

“No,” Sirius said suddenly with a fierceness that surprised James. “We don’t even know if this is useful or not. This could be a huge waste of time.”

“Fine,” Regulus said with a halfhearted shrug. “Stay here then. Remus and I will go.”

James's heart sank, but Sirius looked furious. His eyes narrowed dangerously. Regulus looked unaffected, if anything, there was a slight cockiness on his face.

"You're not taking Remus with you," he said, his voice a low hiss.

One of Regulus's eyebrows twitched. "Why not?"

"I don't think anyone should go alone," Remus said. James thought that Remus was trying to be helpful, but he was almost certain that both of them were missing a treacherous conversation happening between Sirius and Regulus.

"You would think that," Sirius said, though he didn't look away from Regulus.

A bewildered look crossed Remus's face.

"Your choice, Sirius," Regulus said. Sirius was deathly still for a long few moments.

"Remus and I will go," he said finally. The tension in the room seemed to dissipate instantly. Regulus smirked triumphantly. James just felt confused. He had no idea what that interaction meant, and he was too afraid to ask.

It didn't matter though. He'd gotten what he wanted. Though he knew it would be dangerous, Sirius and Remus would have each other, and a lot could change when two people only had each other to rely on out in the world.

More importantly, Regulus had helped him. Despite his repeated refusals to help James get Sirius and Remus back together, he'd actually helped him. Something tender inside him ached. It was a good ache though, like stretching a muscle first thing in the morning. It was progress.

Chapter End Notes

wolfstar is going on a journey. [breiða sjáflr](#).

find the [recommended reading order](#) for the wolfstar fic here

the spy.

Chapter Notes

this chapter was written in part by my resident Snape expert [something_about_mothman](#).

“This has been as delightful as ever,” Severus said as he dropped the other man’s hand, surreptitiously wiping his palm on the side of his robe. He hated being here with these sycophants.

Another day, another meeting with the likes of low-level criminals, specifically Fenrir and Rowle. Why he needed to suffer through their dull-mindedness as if he didn’t have enough of that dealing with students, he had no idea. Most days Severus thought he’d rather be *crucioed* than do any more of whatever it was he was doing. At least then he might die, which would be a blissfully unique experience.

“Professor, don’t you want to stay for the festivities?” Fenrir growled with a delighted smile. Severus would rather dance naked in the Great Hall actually thank you. Not least because the werewolf stank of rotting meat, and his idea of a party was more a massacre than anything resembling joy, but also because Severus unfortunately had more work to do.

“I will have to pass. The holidays are over, and I have other obligations.” Severus gave a tight-lipped smile, hoping to escape another meeting with the deranged Fenrir unscathed. He almost wished he was dealing with Remus again. At least, that man had a semblance of decorum, even if seeing him reminded Severus of some of his worst memories.

“As you wish, Professor.” Fenrir laughed, giving a mocking bow and turning back to Rowle. The two of them were some of the vilest people Severus had ever met, and he wanted to be as far away as possible before they started whatever nonsense they took for fun.

With a quick turn, Severus apparated away. He wanted to go right to the shower to rid himself of the stink of being near Fenrir. He was sure the werewolf had never bathed. But as usual, Severus wasn’t beholden to himself. His shower would have to wait.

He walked quickly down the corridor toward the headmaster’s office, being cautious not to run into any stray students while casting a freshening charm as he went. Why he still bothered caring about smelling good for Dumbledore he didn’t know. He rather loathed the man most days, so it would only be his right to make the headmaster’s office smell of moldy socks. Regardless, he couldn’t abandon his rituals. They were all he had left.

Severus reached the gargoyle statue, muttered the inane sugary password of the week, and walked up the steps. Dumbledore, of course, barely acknowledged him when he stepped through the door. It was like Severus was intruding as if the man hadn’t specifically asked

him to come. It raised his hackles, but he took a calming breath in an attempt to relax the body. As usual, it did nothing for Severus, who could still feel annoyance coursing through him. He tried to tamper it, but it was one of his worst traits. A nice quirk he imagined he inherited from his dear father.

Severus cleared his throat, already growing tired of the headmaster's feigned coyness. Must he always be kept waiting by everyone? He wanted to spend the little time he had before he needed to be asleep in his room alone with the newest book he'd acquired about rare North American plants and their potion uses and pretend he was going on a much-needed vacation.

Severus caught himself before he laughed. A vacation, now that was a joke. He hadn't taken a single holiday in all his years at Hogwarts. Not that he even knew where he might have gone or who he'd spend the time with, but he supposed if he didn't die (very unlikely) this would be his last year teaching if the Defense Against the Dark Arts curse held (Merlin hoping).

It would either be a vacation or death after this for Severus Snape. Either way, he would be shutting his brain off and doing nothing for quite a while. Maybe never again.

"Ah, Severus. So good to see you." Dumbledore finally looked up, and Severus bit back a sarcastic remark. No use, his wit would be lost on the old man.

"Yes, wonderful. Now, you wished to see me?" Severus knew his impatience would only prolong this conversation. Sometimes he was sure Dumbledore drew things out just to annoy him, as if he didn't have enough control over Severus's life.

"How did the meeting go? Anything of interest?" Dumbledore moved, flashing the dying flesh of his hand. A reminder of what Severus must do. He ground his teeth, wanting to rail against the headmaster again. How could the old fool have done this? How could Dumbledore ask what he did of Severus, another thing he must be burdened with? If it wasn't for Narcissa and her idiot son, he thought he might actually disobey this time.

This is why he didn't have his own children, too much trouble, and again the lack of vacation time made it difficult to find someone with whom to procreate. He shuddered thinking of sleeping with any of his colleagues or god forbid the do-gooders in the Order. Not to mention the similarities he had to his father, similarities he tried his best to deny, similarities he hoped never to impart on anyone else.

"Severus." Dumbledore snapped him out of his thoughts. The headmaster was looking at him expectantly. What were they meant to be discussing, and why had he gotten so off track? He imagined the lack of quality sleep was to blame, and constantly being hexed when the Dark Lord lost what sanity he currently retained certainly wasn't helping.

"No, nothing of interest." Severus cleared his throat, checking his Occlumency shields. "Fenrir is rampaging as usual, but I'm sure your pet werewolf has already told you that, and there have been no new developments in your attempted murder." Severus clasped his hands behind his back, shifting slightly on his feet, impatient to be done with his charade and let his guard down in his own rooms.

“Ah, that is good to hear. And any mention of the boy?” The boy, of course, being Harry. It hardly seemed fair for Dumbledore to speak of him so fondly knowing that he had been slowly leading him to death since that terrible Halloween night. A sacrificial lamb, but not if Severus had a say.

He thought it was one of the better things he'd ever done in his life to tell Regulus about the Horcrux. Certainly, Regulus would take Harry and flee, as any good Slytherin would, no matter how Gryffindor the younger Black had become. Once a snake always a snake. Severus thought he might feel bad that he was potentially dooming the world to an eternal Dark Lord, but he had no doubt that Harry Potter would eventually come to face his fate. The savior complex in that one would always win out. The stupid twit.

“No mention of him, no. The Dark Lord has been in a peculiar mood since the incident.” The incident being Bellatrix's mysterious murder in the Dark Lord's headquarters, more well-known as Malfoy Manor. No one is certain how this came to happen or who did it given that only her immediate family were in the manor with her at the time.

Severus, on the other hand, was certain of what happened, which was that Bellatrix got what she deserved, and he was not at all sad to know the woman was dead. One less monster to terrorize the world. Although, he did feel a bit bad for Narcissa, as she had to deal with cleaning up the mess. He could imagine it was difficult getting blood out of a priceless sixteenth -century carpet without causing irreparable damage.

Not that the Malfoys couldn't simply pay for a new one, but Lucius had screamed about tradition and values and *how dare someone come here and desecrate his home* . No mention of the people being held captive in his basement. Severus mentally eye-rolled at that. Although, Severus was sure the whole rant had more to do with saving face against the Dark Lord, who took the whole incident as well as one might imagine, which was not well at all.

“Good, good. Then I think that will be all. Thank you, Severus.” Dumbledore gave that grandfatherly smile that had once soothed Severus but now made him want to scream. How dare he sit there and smile with kindness at Severus, at the man who was going to kill him.

With the dismissal, Severus gave a nod and turned to leave, not bothering with any further pleasantries. Before his brain could start to get away from him, he was back in his own room, sinking into his plush armchair. It was a bit cold, but he didn't bother lighting a fire. Sometimes it was nice to just feel something, even if it was the biting of winter in the dungeons.

Most days he felt older than his years, and the horrible part was he mostly had himself to blame. Becoming a Death Eater was his choice, no one forced him. Yes, he was a half-blood in a viper den of purebloods, and yes, he didn't have much else in his life, no friends, prospects, or money, but he could have chosen differently. He should have.

He could have been like Lily. Severus tried never to think of her, which became extremely difficult when her son started Hogwarts as his student. God, he hated Harry Potter. Not just because he hated James Potter and seeing his face staring up at him every day was enough to do his head in, but even more because Severus didn't actually hate the boy at all but merely hated himself every time he was reminded of his own failings.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh. If he was going to get all maudlin, then he might as well have a drink. He rose, tossing a careless *Incendio* at the fireplace, and went to his stash of firewhiskey.

Once he had secured himself a neat double, he settled back into his armchair for another long night with his own thoughts. Severus had too many of these lately and was growing immensely exhausted by it all.

Finding out about the Horcrux in Harry and then being told that he must kill the one man who he might consider remotely a mentor made it next to impossible to pretend anymore, to close off the parts of his life that hurt to look at, the regret that brewed beneath the surface of Severus's skin. He supposed had he been a better person, he would have done something positive with that regret, but he was a Snape, and that entailed him being the worst kind of man. A self-destructive apathetic hostile creature, not fit for human companionship.

At least he hadn't inherited the violence. Although, Severus didn't imagine he'd be winning any accolades for his humanitarianism anytime soon. Suffice it to say, he was a terrible Death Eater, but an equally terrible Order member. Failing in both aspects, an unsuitable follower to each of his masters.

The thought made him laugh as he took a sip of his drink. It was rather fitting the purgatory he put himself into, not the best at anything nor the worst. Severus slumped further into the chair, staring into the fire.

He went to take another drink but found that his cup was empty. When had he finished it, he wondered with a sigh. Maybe it was time to turn in. But Severus knew he'd never be able to sleep, and he was trying to limit his dreamless sleep usage until he really needed it. Probably sometime after he murdered an ailing man or possibly Thursday after double Defense Against the Dark Arts class with the sixth years.

Severus reached over to his side table, grabbing the book on North American plants and thumbing through it listlessly, but all he could think about was Lily. Why was she always haunting him? Couldn't he have a moment's peace without remembering his pledge to her ghost to right the wrongs he'd done?

Of course, he didn't know the extent to which trying to get ahead would be his complete downfall, which was why Severus decided after that to never try to be better. There was no reason for someone like him to get ahead. It only led to him mindlessly sharing a prophecy that resulted in the death of the last person he ever allowed to know him.

Now he was shackled to two masters, both terrible in their own ways. Dumbledore would kill him with kindness and reassuring words, and the Dark Lord would chop away his humanity, any semblance of goodness and hope so that Severus would simply end his own life rather than continue on. Either way, he'd be dead, and he couldn't say he would be disappointed.

Lily would tell him to stop being bleak, that there was good in the world, magic! Not everything was bad, didn't he see? Which was all well and good when she was still in his life, or even alive somewhere with the possibility that they might be friends again. It wasn't helpful when she was just a pile of bones buried six feet deep.

He had blamed himself first because he was a masochist, and he'd led the Dark Lord to her doorstep. Then he had blamed the Dark Lord because he did the killing but honestly, it was a predictable move for him. By that point, the Dark Lord could hardly be blamed for committing murder, a man had to have his hobbies. Lastly, Severus blamed James Potter because he let her die.

How Severus expected James to fight against the Dark Lord at twenty-one and with no real notice of his arrival, he wasn't sure, but he was sure he would have done a better job than simply dying as soon as the door opened. He'd started to think the problem was more that James Potter didn't care about Lily, not the way she deserved. She wasn't loved the way Severus had hoped she would be.

Of course, he'd figured out that Regulus and James had something going on, it didn't take a genius, especially after Regulus reappeared and befriended Harry Potter of all people. Severus had his suspicions when they were all in school but when James and Lily began to date, he put it to the back of his mind. Now, when his life was creeping towards what he thought of as his inevitable end, he couldn't ignore the questions and emotions surfacing about that fateful Halloween night.

Yes, Severus had loathed James Potter and his gang since the moment he'd met them, and certainly more after he'd screwed up his friendship with Lily and she went running to Sirius first, then to James. Now though, he disliked James for not appreciating what he'd had, for letting Lily be someone secondary to Regulus Black.

But he didn't get to decide how Lily lived her life after what he said to her and the organization he'd chosen to join, and by extension, he didn't get to be privy to her last moments. Maybe James Potter wasn't so bad, but it was easier for Severus to shift some blame to someone else, and much easier to put that on the dead. If Severus kept all the negative emotions for himself, he'd never have been able to survive so long and unfortunately, he had work to do.

Severus slumped his head back onto the chair with a sigh. He rested there for a moment before deciding it was time to go to bed, but not before an extremely hot shower. Hopefully, the water would be able to burn off the smell of decay that seemed ever-present on him these days.

The water slid over him, blazing paths down his skin, but even after thirty minutes, he still couldn't scrub away anything that was troubling him, so he gave up and shut the water off. He cast a drying charm and quickly dressed for bed.

Severus took one slow walk around his rooms, snuffing out the fire, replacing his liquor bottle, and ensuring his locks and wards were intact. Clearly, they were, but he'd grown increasingly paranoid as he aged. Or maybe not paranoid, so much as aware that there were a lot of people who wished him harm.

After all that, he finally laid down in bed, only five hours before he needed to be awake. That was better than he'd done in a while, but Severus knew he'd still probably stay awake staring into the darkness until his body finally gave up in exhaustion.

Which was precisely the case, his alarm woke him with a groan, he swore he'd just gone to sleep.

"Another day of educating the youths," Severus mumbled and busied himself getting ready for work. He was surprised to see Regulus and Harry at the Gryffindor table when students returned from their holiday. He wondered what he planned to do about the Horcrux. He and Regulus made eye contact for only a split second, and though his face was unreadable, carefully blank, Snape thought he could see a determination there that he found oddly comforting.

He hoped he made the right decision telling Regulus. He hoped that Lily would be happy with him for putting Harry above the plan Dumbledore had set for him. He couldn't be sure, she might be disappointed that Snape might potentially be robbing Harry of his future glory. He didn't know what he would have done had Regulus not been there to take the brunt of the responsibility. He didn't think he would have ever done anything on his own.

That day was quick, more of the same work and another long, empty evening. This pattern continued for several days, teaching, meetings, self-loathing, and sleepless nights. Nothing of note, no real change until the Thursday afternoon after the spring term began.

Severus started to think his meditating might be paying off, as he'd survived double Defense Against the Dark Arts with the sixth-year group and only wanted to *incendio* himself three times. Overall, he thought he'd managed to retain his temper to a simmer rather than a volcanic eruption. Severus would take that as a win.

"Class dismissed." Severus waved the group off and dropped into his chair, deciding to get some essays graded before his next class. Maybe he might actually get a moment to relax later, unlikely, but a man could hope. The essays were all a bunch of drivel for the most part, although it was interesting to see students excelling where they didn't in potions. His last year at Hogwarts might be semi-blissful, which was what he deserved after being forced to stay here for so long.

"Professor." Severus tilted his head up from grading to look at Neville. He had begrudgingly begun to like the boy. If anything, Severus saw a bit of himself in Neville. It was hard to be a constant disappointment to your family. He, disgustingly and shamefully, empathized with the boy after Regulus had all but threatened him into helping him.

"Yes?" he drawled when Neville didn't speak.

"I was wondering if you enjoyed the book about North American plants I gave you." Neville wrung his hands, still nervous even after an extraordinary growth spurt and months of lessons with Severus.

"It has been illuminating. Certainly far better than most of these essays." Severus didn't smile. He wanted to, but already he felt a bit nauseous with the tender feeling welling in him for the Longbottom boy.

Severus didn't like to be wrong or to realize the error of his ways (always such a complicated mess of emotions), but Regulus had been right in his treatment of *some* of his students. He thought Neville was particularly thriving with the right motivation, although it took a lot more to be nice to Harry and his little gang. Another reminder of the past that Severus would rather leave behind if only he could.

"Excellent. I'm glad, Professor." Neville beamed, excitedly clasping his hands together. Severus hoped he didn't try to hug him. "I'll just be going then. See you for lessons" He nodded to Neville, who quickly hurried out of the classroom still beaming.

Severus couldn't remember the last genuine smile he'd seen. It might have been after Umbridge "disappeared." The staff had thrown a subdued mourning ceremony that had been anything but subdued. It might well have been the happiest memorial he'd ever attended. She certainly was a missing person that no one missed at all.

Severus did laugh at that, going back to grading essays. If he had his time right, he had over an hour before his next class. That should be more than enough time for him to finish these papers. Then, tonight he would actually sleep.

That plan was of course ruined when his damned Dark Mark began to burn. Severus scowled, dropping his quill. He hastily sent a patronus to Dumbledore informing him of his need elsewhere, grabbed his cloak, and pressed his wand to the mark.

A moment later, he was bowing before the Dark Lord. Severus pressed his lips together, trying to hide his contempt. Just another day and another master to serve, and of course no time for himself.

"My Lord, you summoned me?" Severus kept his head bowed, better not to make any eye contact and hopefully he'd survive this encounter with minimal damage.

the train ride.

Chapter Notes

it's james potter's birthday today so i'm updating a bit early. :)

Regulus returned to Hogwarts feeling like he was missing something. As if a piece of himself had been blasted out of his body or obliviated from his memories.

The night before he was set to board the Hogwarts Express, only two days before spring term began, Regulus relaxed on his bed and sang the *Æphodí* for the first time since his death. He wasn't sure that he needed it. His magical core seemed to have returned whole and undamaged, but there was something relaxing about it, something that allowed him to disconnect from the pressures of the real world.

Soft hands cradled him instantly, not stretching or hurting him like they used to, just holding him. He felt like he was floating on his back in a large, slow-moving river. As if he was drifting under a stretch of trees, cutting the cloudless sky to pieces with their branches. The danger from before still threatened him, dancing under his skin like a celebration of his own stupidity, but he hadn't cared before and he didn't care now.

He couldn't say how long he drifted there, but when he finally returned to his body, he was calmer. There were tears running down the sides of his face having escaped his closed eyes. He didn't mind them, his chest rarely felt so light. He didn't think he'd taken a full breath since before his death.

He could feel exhaustion pulling him to sleep, but he fought it, using his last bits of energy to build and reinforce his Occlumency walls, tucking away each of the things that worried him and demanded attention. He took extra care with the secrets he held dear, the kinds of whispers that could destroy him and his family if someone else grabbed hold of them.

The destroyed Horcruxes. The Horcrux in Harry. The Horcrux in the Lestrangle Vault. The prophecy. James Potter's return. The Norse Ritual. Sirius and Remus's journey. His animagus form. His true identity. Kreacher's betrayal. Snape's trust. Umbridge's murder. Bellatrix's death. His own deaths and rebirths. His familial love for Harry, Sirius, Draco, and even Remus. His care for everyone else — Ron, Hermione, Luna, Parvati, Lavender, Neville, Theo, Ginny, and the twins. His longing, pain, and love for James.

He locked it all away, built walls bordering each item, storing them separately so if one broke loose, the others would remain in place, untouched by treachery. Then he found other memories, things that a child might call a secret because of humiliation or some other such silly reason, and he packed them around all his true secrets.

His failed date and kiss with Alexander. His fake relationship with Parvati. Barty forcing him to act like a cat. Nearly drowning after Harry saved him from the lake. The muggle he'd hedonistically attempted to hook up with. A whole host of memories from his first life that he was mortified to relive.

He was careful, meticulous, and he didn't finish until the sun was rising outside his window. His eyes ached from lack of sleep, and he finally succumbed to it, if only for an hour or two. He would have plenty of time to rest once at Hogwarts. Regardless, protecting himself and everyone else was more important than sleep.

He wondered if that was why he felt like he was missing something, as if he'd tucked away pieces of his emotions in order to protect his secrets, but he'd never had that problem with Occlumency before. If anything, hiding his emotions was the thing he struggled with the most, even as he learned Occlumency as a child and got better as an adult. The emotions always seeped through the walls.

So, he wasn't sure why he felt the way he did, but he tried not to dwell on it.

He greeted Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Luna once he and Harry found them on the train. Dean and Seamus were also in the same compartment, but they were standing blocking the door like they hadn't decided if they were going to stay or leave. He thought that Dean and Ginny were still dating if he remembered correctly, but she seemed indifferent to his presence, so Regulus couldn't be sure.

"Think I might go find Hermione," Harry mumbled to Regulus quietly, probably to ensure that Ron didn't hear him. Lavender wasn't in sight yet, but Regulus figured it was only a matter of time. According to Harry, she'd given Ron a gaudy heart-shaped necklace bearing the words "my sweetheart" for Christmas. Regulus couldn't help but think that Parvati would have loved a gift like that from Lavender. Ron could never appreciate such a thing. Not that Regulus would want something like that either, so he didn't blame him.

"Yeah, good idea," Regulus replied. He hoped Hermione's holiday hadn't been too soured by Ron and Lavender's relationship. He hadn't been giving her enough support last term, he could only hope that Harry's presence had been making up for it. He vowed to be better now — more attentive.

Once Harry was gone, Regulus looked around the compartment, greeting everyone quietly and taking in their appearances. Most of them seemed relaxed, though Ron's shoulders were tense with worry. That wasn't uncommon these days, things were brewing in the Ministry, and Regulus doubted that Ron escaped hearing those rumors. He knew that Ron worried for his family.

The rest of them seemed fine, so he left his trunk and Nyx's cage with them and went in search of his first target.

See, Regulus hadn't just spent his time packing away all his memories, thoughts, and secrets. He had spent his time making a plan. Though other things were in motion — Sirius and Remus off in Norway finding the answer, James alone but hopefully safe, working on a safe

house for everyone — there were other parts of Regulus's life that had grown stagnant and he intended to put his energy toward them.

The first, and most pressing, item on the list was ensuring Draco's safety. He'd allowed too much to come to pass in the previous few months. If Draco was on the train, if he was back at Hogwarts — and fuck, he hoped that he was — then Regulus wasn't letting him go again.

During his first life, Regulus would have never asked for help. He let his beliefs and choices go unquestioned, he rejected and fought with anyone who might have been able to get him out, and he convinced himself that he was doing what was right and honorable. He knew the mindset that Draco no doubt lived in, and he knew that the only thing that would save him was someone forcing him out.

He understood that Draco worried for his parents, but Narcissa and Lucius were adults, they would have to make their own choices. He wouldn't help them if they didn't want it. But clearly, they weren't doing enough to protect Draco if he'd been meeting with the Dark Lord. Regulus needed to step in.

He found Draco right where he'd hoped he would be, in a compartment with his Slytherin friends. He breathed a large sigh of relief and walked down the hallway so that he wouldn't be spotted through the window by anyone in the compartment, leaning up against the wall to wait. He'd only had a second to look at him, but he didn't look terrible. He was at least alive and here. They had let him come back and for now, that would have to be enough.

He wasn't sure at first if Draco spotted him or not, but he thought he might have because it wasn't long before he left the compartment. Draco made eye contact with him for just a second before heading in the opposite direction. Regulus followed him to a mostly empty compartment. The two boys that were there fled without being asked to, both of them giggling happily as they played with an object that Regulus was sure came from the twins' shop.

He locked and silenced the door behind him, walked forward, and — perhaps a bit aggressively — shoved Draco into a seat. Draco fell back with a huff, an incredulous look on his face. Regulus was glad that he'd caught him off guard cause he was almost certain that Draco was stronger than him.

"What was that for?" Draco asked, his voice had gotten deeper over the last year, but there was still an unhappy whine to it that reminded Regulus of when Draco was still a little kid.

Regulus didn't answer him, instead reaching out and shoving Draco's sleeve up his arm to get a look at his forearm. Draco tried to shake him off, but Regulus had a tight enough grip on him to see that it was blank.

"What is your problem?" Draco snapped. Regulus stepped back the next time Draco tried to shake him off then slowly lowered himself into the seat across from him.

"He didn't mark you," Regulus said matter of factly.

“Obviously not,” Draco sneered. Regulus had to work not to roll his eyes, he was going to be aggressive enough as it was, and he didn’t need to add to it.

“I’m surprised he didn’t,” Regulus said unkindly. Draco flinched, actually flinched, his eyes showing a spark of betrayal.

“What?”

“You’re failing him, aren’t you? I mean I assume that if you were succeeding that something would have happened already. He must be mad that you’re so useless to him.”

Draco’s face turned from surprise to anger in a flash. “You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he hissed.

“I know better than anyone.”

“I will not fail him.”

“Oh, so you’re invested? You want him to prevail?”

Draco ground his teeth together but did not reply. He seemed to sense the trap that he’d missed a moment before.

“You know what his success means, don’t you? It means Harry dead, along with half your classmates.”

“That’s not true,” Draco said darkly.

“Harry humiliated him. The Dark Lord would never allow him to survive. This war ends with Harry rotting in the ground.”

“Shut up! You have no idea what you’re talking about!” He stood up when he said it, repeating the words he’d hissed a moment earlier like saying them twice would make them true. Regulus didn’t even bother to look up at him, instead sending a very quick stinging hex his way to force him to sit back down.

“I know because unlike you I’ve been fighting him for years. You think you know what’s going on? You’re nothing but a pawn.”

“Fighting him? You have not even done anything. No one even knows who you *are*,” Draco said breathlessly, rubbing his chest where the stinging hex was likely still burning.

“Why don’t they?” Regulus asked, his words sharp as a snake’s bite, right to the jugular that Draco had just revealed.

“What do you mean?” Draco said cautiously.

“Why doesn’t anyone know who I am?” Draco’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “You know who I am. Why haven’t you told them? Why aren’t they out there trying to kill me?”

Draco froze. Regulus could practically feel the victory he'd been working toward. It would have to be one of many, he wasn't delusional enough to think one would be enough, but one was more than he had a moment before. Draco looked like an animal caught in a trap. Regulus almost wanted to have pity on him, but he couldn't let up.

"You don't think the Dark Lord would appreciate that information?"

"Do you want me to tell him?" Draco asked. The words should have sounded like a threat, but there was real fear destabilizing them.

"What are you doing for him?"

Draco looked at the door for a split second, almost as if he was planning to run.

"Answer me."

"I can't tell you," Draco whispered.

"Yes, you can. Nothing is going to happen to you if you tell me."

"My parents —"

"No one will know but the two of us. Tell me."

Draco's face was one of childish fear. He looked so young. Way too young. "There's a Vanishing Cabinet in the Room of Requirement. I'm fixing it."

"Why?"

Draco flinched again, a quick flash of pain crossing his features. "To let Death Eaters into the school."

Regulus nodded slowly, leaning back to mull over Draco's words. Getting Death Eaters into the school would be quite a feat, but he was sure that wasn't the end of it. There had to be something else. Why else would Draco be using an Unforgivable on another student? Still, he didn't want to push. This was enough to work with for now.

"You're going to show me."

Draco looked upset, but he also looked resigned. He finally nodded. "Okay," he whispered.

Regulus stood. He wanted to put a hand on Draco's shoulder, to tell him that he was going to protect him, that it was going to be okay, but he knew that Draco wouldn't appreciate it, not in the state he was in. Merlin, Regulus had gone soft. He'd been spending too much time with Gryffindors.

He left Draco in the compartment and went in search of his next target. Parvati. Although James was wildly entertained by their fake dating ploy, Regulus just grew more uncomfortable with it as time went on. Besides, Parvati deserved a chance to be happy, and if it wasn't with her current crush, then it could easily be with someone else.

He didn't have to search for long as Lavender was apparently already looking for him. "Hey, have you seen Ron?" she said before bothering to greet him.

There was nothing he could do about that situation — at least, not yet. He would have to see.

"Yeah, he's in the last car," he said. "Where's Parvati?"

Lavender smirked and pointed behind her. Regulus knocked their shoulders together good-naturedly as they passed one another, giving her a quick smile before heading down the hallway.

"Hey," he greeted softly when he found her. She was looking out the window forlornly, biting her cheek so roughly that Regulus was sure she was drawing blood.

"Hi," she said quietly, looking back at him. "Did you see Lavender? She went to see Ron."

"I know, I just saw her," Regulus said. "Where's your sister?"

Parvati rolled her eyes. "With her friends. She didn't want me to come along."

"Would you have even wanted to?"

Parvati smiled for the first time since he entered the compartment, just a tiny thing, blink and he'd miss it. "Not really. All they do is talk about school. I mean I know they're Ravenclaws, but there are other Ravenclaws who aren't so annoying. I don't know what their problem is."

Regulus laughed loudly, holding his stomach as he did so, surprised by the mean glint in her eyes. He couldn't help but revel in it. "Maybe they're just swots," he joked once he'd got himself under control.

"Probably." Parvati rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Good Christmas?" he asked. She nodded.

"It was alright. Could have been better. I went to stay with Lavender for New Years, but she wouldn't stop talking about Ron, so I ended up going home."

"Oh? Was she upset that you left?"

"I doubt she even noticed," Parvati grumbled unhappily. Regulus didn't know if that was true. Lavender did have a habit of missing when someone else was upset, but he doubted that she wouldn't care at all if Parvati left.

"I'm sorry," he said, then cleared his throat. "I actually wanted to talk to you about that."

"About what?"

"The thing with Lavender."

Parvati's face flashed red. "What about it?"

Regulus gave her a measured look. "You agreed that we would only fake-date until Christmas."

"Oh, right," she replied, frowning deeply.

"And I think you should... explore other options."

"Explore other options?" she asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Yes," he said. "Forget what Lavender would think for a second. You deserve to be happy and it's not going to be as my fake girlfriend."

She sighed quietly, glancing back out the window, her eyes dancing along the trees as they passed. "I guess."

He figured that was as much give as she would offer that day, so he let that point lie. "Let's plan our fake break up."

Parvati smiled slightly. "Fine," she agreed. He thought that she was still trying to sound grumpy, but her grin betrayed her. He knew she loved drama, he should have realized that was the quickest route through the conversation.

He left an hour later, feeling more settled and happy to see Parvati laughing gleefully as she pulled out one of her many romance novels. He hadn't noticed before, but she'd stopped reading them after Ron and Lavender started dating. He wondered if they'd been too painful for her at the time.

His last target was Hermione, they were already close, but with the way things were going with the war, he worried about her. She was already sitting with Harry in a compartment all to themselves. Hermione was reading quietly, and Harry seemed to be fighting sleep as he stared out the window. He kept blinking slower and slower. He had dark circles under his eyes like he hadn't been sleeping well. Regulus wondered if the Horcrux had been affecting him, or if it was the stress of everything else.

"Regulus," Hermione greeted politely. She didn't look as forlorn as Parvati had, but there was a sadness to her, a loneliness that he hadn't seen since first year.

Regulus smiled at her, sitting down beside Harry. "Has the trolley come by here yet?" His stomach grumbled right after he spoke. He'd forgotten to eat breakfast that morning.

Hermione chuckled softly and shook her head. "Not yet."

"Tired?" he asked Harry. There was comfort in being with just Harry and Hermione, he didn't feel like he needed to carry on a conversation in the same way he did with others. Though he wanted to spend time with Hermione, he didn't feel the same driving force as he did with Parvati and Draco.

"Yeah, a bit. Weird dreams," Harry said blearily, rubbing his eye with the back of his hand. "I, erm..." He looked uncomfortable for a moment. "I told Hermione. I know we're not supposed to tell anyone, but I figured since Ron knew."

It took Regulus a second to catch up and realize that Harry meant James. “No, of course,” Regulus said. “We can trust Hermione.” Besides, he thought, he didn’t want Hermione and Ron at odds. They would all need each other soon and keeping secrets between them wouldn’t help bridge the gap.

Her polite smile widened into something more authentic. “I cannot believe that Harry’s father returned. Harry said he came back with you. Is that true?”

Regulus nodded. “We don’t know why,” he said. It felt like a lie. “We’re just glad he’s back.”

Harry nodded once but he didn’t add to it. Hermione gave Harry a searching look, her eyes glittering. She also looked tired Regulus realized. It upset him to see so many teenagers suffering. He wished he could shield them.

“Is it weird?” she asked Harry.

Harry shrugged, giving Regulus a sideways look like he wasn’t sure how honest he was allowed to be in Regulus’s presence.

“It’s all right,” Regulus said quietly, nudging him softly.

“It’s kind of weird,” Harry admitted after a moment. “I know he’s my dad, but he’s so young. I feel like everyone is expecting me to, like, connect with him or something.”

“No one is expecting anything from you,” Regulus said, though he wasn’t positive that he was telling the truth. He supposed there was some part of him that expected James and Harry to connect. If he looked for it, he could feel a spark of jealousy about it, about being left behind now that Harry had everyone he could need, nearly everyone that he was meant to have had the war never happened.

“I guess,” Harry mumbled. “I just don’t know how to talk to him. The way everyone talked about him I expected him to be... I don’t know... happier.”

“He’s not happy?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged again. “He doesn’t seem happy.”

Regulus nodded slowly, a wave of guilt swelling and crashing in an instant. “He’s been through a lot,” he confessed.

Harry and Hermione gave him curious and confused looks. He gave a resigned sigh, leaning forward and lowering his voice.

“Probably best not to mention it to anyone, but there’s a reason we didn’t see James until months after I returned.”

“Where was he?” Hermione asked quickly, though there was already a spark of understanding in her eyes.

“The Unspeakables kept him. I don’t know what happened to him, Sirius refused to talk about it, and I didn’t want to bring it up to James in case it upset him, but I — I don’t think he was let go willingly.”

In all actuality, Regulus had been trying very hard *not* to think about what may or may not have happened to James during his time with the Unspeakables. He was different from the last time they’d spoken, but he’d also lived through the war and spent months in hiding worrying for his life as well as the lives of his wife and son. That kind of stress could change a person. So he didn’t know if James’s changes could be attributed to his time with the Unspeakables.

He was worried about what he would do when he eventually found out though. Even just thinking about James being scared and alone, having to escape on his own, upset him deeply. He could feel the boiling murderous rage growing each time he imagined it. He’d never killed anyone before Umbridge, but now he worried that that murder had damaged him. Murder split the soul, as he knew all too well, and the desire to murder once again surged when he pictured the Department of Mysteries of James trapped there.

“That makes sense,” Hermione said with a self-satisfied nod. “If I was researching magic and someone came back from the dead, I would want to conduct research on them.”

“Hermione!” Harry said, horrified.

It was the same thought that Regulus had had. He’d forgotten about that, when he’d talked to Sirius and wondered why the Unspeakables hadn’t asked him any questions, why they’d let him go so easily. He was so frustrated with himself. Why didn’t he see it?

Hermione seemed to realize the way her words had come out. Regulus knew she didn’t mean them in an off-putting way, it was just the way her brain worked. She frowned.

“It must be difficult to adjust,” she said. “At least, he has Sirius and R—Remus there with him.” She was always having trouble saying his first name. He could practically feel her wanting to call him Professor Lupin. It made him chuckle that she didn’t have the same problem with Sirius. He doubted that she respected Sirius even half as much as she respected Remus.

It took a moment for her words to fully sink in and by the time they did, the guilt he’d been fighting earlier became overwhelming. He’d left James there alone. Sirius and Remus were out of the country and James was trapped in Grimmauld, with only a few tasks to keep him company. Regulus should have left him the mirror. Sirius had one of them, and Harry had the other. James had no way of contacting them. He didn’t even have an owl.

Regulus had been so focused on everything else that he’d missed the way that James was being left in the lurch. He wondered if Sirius or Remus were thinking the same thing. Did anyone notice that he’d been falling through the cracks? At least Harry had noticed that he was sad, though he couldn’t do anything to solve that problem, nor should he have to bear that responsibility.

Regulus leaned back, hitting his head against the wall of the compartment, and allowing his thoughts to drift for a moment as Harry and Hermione moved on to different topics. He would have to add James to his list. He would only be able to help him from afar, but it was more than nothing. He couldn't just leave him with no support.

the letters.

Dear James,

Do you remember when I told you about Parvati? What am I saying? Of course, you do. You laughed at me for no less than four hours the last time I mentioned it. Well, you'll be happy to know that it has finally ended in a way that was horrible for my reputation. Truly, I have no idea how I will possibly recover.

She did it publicly — necessary when you're fake dating, you understand. I let her plan it, she's a frequent purveyor of muggle romance novels (of which I've been asked to read many) so she had a plan before it all even began. She wanted to come out of it looking like the wronged party, it's much easier to recover that way, at least socially, so I had to be the one who did something wrong. Please, keep all comments about any of my past mistakes to yourself, I do not need them at the moment. I'm getting enough judgment from my fellow students.

I could ramble on and on about the extensive planning and background information that went into our "fight," but it would just be tiring and needlessly pedantic. What's important for you to know is that Parvati decided to confront me about me never sending her a Christmas gift, despite saying I would. It's a disgrace to scorn a lover by not giving them a garish present over the Christmas holidays. Remind me to tell you about Lavender's gift to Ron, it was quite ostentatious.

Needless to say, when the hefty population of the Gryffindor common room discovered my misdeed, they all turned against me. Parvati was incredible, a natural actress — she rubbed some chili powder that she stole from the kitchens around her eyes to make it look like she was crying — and she spent no less than twenty minutes accusing me of "not caring about her" and "only being interested in my friends."

By the end of it, not a single person in the common room was looking away, all of them staring open-mouthed as Parvati dumped me. It was quite the show, I believe you would have found it entertaining. Honestly, Sirius probably would as well, but I'm hoping to keep it from him for as long as possible. He has more than enough dirt to use against me as it is, I don't need to give him anything else.

It worked though. Several girls followed Parvati up to her dorm room when she ran out "crying," while I was shunned from the common room. I don't mind though, it's better if people don't like me too much. I have enough to worry about without having to deal with a bunch of people trying to befriend me. I'm not sure what it is about this year, but I keep getting cornered by random seventh, fifth, and even fourth years that I've never met asking if I want to "study together." I have no idea why it's happening, and every time I try to ask, everyone just laughs.

Anyway, it's cleared up my schedule a bit because Lavender is currently mad at me for hurting her friend as if I'm the one Parvati's secretly in love with. Honestly, these teenagers

make me feel so old. Oh, I was going to tell you about Ron's gift from Lavender — it is a very large heart-shaped necklace with the words 'my sweetheart' engraved on it, it looks so heavy that if Ron happened to fall into the Black Lake, he would sink to the bottom. Keep in mind that he did not gift her anything, but I'm certain I overheard her telling him that him wearing her gift was "more than enough for her." I almost feel bad for her. I don't think Ron realizes the trap he's walking into, but we all have to learn eventually.

Regardless, everyone is so swallowed up by relationship dramatics that they hardly have time to bother me, which is fine. I have too much on my plate as it is.

I'm worried about Draco, as I always am, but I can't detail anything about him here. I've added protections to the letter, as many as I can remember, but you can never be too careful. I've intervened where I can, and I think I've at least got him eating again, which is good. He's far too thin. The stress is too much for him.

Harry and Ron are back in the thick of Quidditch practice. Harry isn't pushing them as hard as you would have, but he's by no means an easy-going captain. Secretly, I think that Harry thinks he's not that intense, but I've gone out a few times to watch them and he's quick with his critiques. He doesn't let anything slide. I think they have the next match in the bag, but you never know what could happen. I know Harry wants the Quidditch Cup badly, even if he won't say it out loud.

Hermione is already studying for finals. I can't remember how much I've told you about her, but no one in Harry's year works as hard as she does. I would say that's a compliment, except I think her hard work is more of a compulsion than any kind of virtue of determination. Every time someone brings up an activity that isn't studying, I swear I can see Hermione's right eye twitching. I can't help her much. Though we study together often, I can't provide much beyond companionship.

I've asked Dobby — the house elf that used to belong to the Malfoys but was freed by Harry (I can't recall if I've told you about him) — to make sure she has frequent snacks and tea brought to her. She's started skipping meals because of the study compulsion, but also because she doesn't like to spend time around Ron and Lavender. I don't blame her, they're very intense.

Do you remember Pandora Burke? She was a Ravenclaw in your year. She married Xenophilius Lovegood. Anyway, her daughter is a year below Harry. She's very kind. She has a gentleness that I've rarely seen in anyone. I think she's lonely. She didn't have many friends when I first met her, and though I've worked to include her in the group, I don't think she connects well with others.

She and Ron used to talk frequently due to Ron excelling in Divination — Luna often repeats that she's "not allowed to take Divination" though I've yet to determine why — but I don't think they've spent much or any time together since Ron and Lavender began dating. Hermione doesn't get along with her, they're too different. Harry likes her, I think he finds her comforting, but now that Quidditch is ramping up, he rarely has free time.

I've thought about asking Neville — Frank and Alice Longbottom's son — to spend some time with her, but he's so wrapped up in his Potions and Herbology work that it seems he doesn't

have much free time. He's a sweet boy, I think you would like him. Well, except for his friendship with Professor Snape. That you would hate.

But for Luna, I hate knowing that she doesn't have many people her own age to speak to, but I'm not sure how to fix it. I'm starting to think I'll have to get help from an outside source. There are a few students I met last year that might turn out to be useful, but it's hard to tell right now. I don't know. What would you do?

Her birthday is in February. I'm thinking about throwing an extravagant party and forcing everyone I know to go. It's probably unethical for me to buy a bunch of teenagers some firewhiskey, but I'm getting desperate. Besides, and you mustn't share this, I want Harry to have as much time living like a normal teenager as possible. If that involves getting too drunk at his friend's birthday party, then so be it.

They've just put up the signs for apparition lessons this year. I'd forgotten all about them. There was no trace on my magic after I was brought back to life, so I've been apparating freely for years. Harry and his friends are all excited and nervous about the lessons though. I understand, it's an exciting time for them, but it can be intimidating magic the first time around. I'll have to get my license again, so I'm thinking about partially splinching myself so I don't seem too good at it right away. Perhaps that's an overreaction, but I feel the Ministry's eyes everywhere. I don't want to draw unnecessary attention.

How are things going on your end of things? I know you've been given two hefty tasks, and I don't envy you. Especially being alone in Grimmauld Place. I hope that isn't bothering you too much. I would say that I hope Sirius and Remus return quickly, but I think that may be unlikely.

Write back when you can.

Yours, Regulus

P.S. This owl is yours. I snuck into Hogsmeade to purchase him for you. I didn't want you to be without one. Feel free to name him whatever you like, he hasn't been given one yet.

James's cheeks hurt from smiling by the time he finished reading Regulus's letter, though the crossed-out 'yours' at the end made his chest hurt for a moment. He tried not to dwell on it.

He was happy to hear from Regulus, especially in such a casual way. It was as if they were really friends. He'd thought he'd have to go without any communication with anyone. He'd been trying to be brave about it, but he never liked being alone with his thoughts, and they were especially vicious nowadays.

After Sirius and Remus left and he was finally alone in Sirius and Regulus's childhood home, he felt a deep, yawning emptiness open up within him. He stood frozen in the living room for at least an hour before he could get himself to move, swallowed by the silence. It was like it was stealing his humanness, shelling him out.

He wandered around the house uselessly for at least a day. He couldn't stop thinking about Sirius and Regulus spending their childhoods trapped in the dark house. The summer after

first year, James spent an exorbitant amount of time wondering about what Sirius might be up to. He thought he was having a fun summer with his brother, it wasn't until Sirius returned to school for second year that James realized his home life was way worse than Sirius had originally made it seem.

It haunted him, especially after Sirius nearly died, and Regulus crashed into his life like a rogue Bludger. Now he was trapped in the house just as they had been. It made him feel claustrophobic. Barely a day passed before he was itching to leave.

He was very relieved to receive a letter from Regulus, something lightened in his chest, making him feel like he wasn't so weighed down. It was about halfway through January, and he was tired from the work he'd been putting in, but he'd brightened instantly while reading the letter. He felt awake, finally.

He mulled over the letter for two days before replying, going to the library to find a quill and a spare piece of parchment he could use.

Dear Regulus,

Thank you so much for the owl. He's quite handsome. I don't know owl breeds very well, what kind do you figure he is? I've decided to name him Fitzroy. I found it in one of the many books that (presumably) Lavender and Parvati gave you. I hope you don't mind me reading them, it gets boring here at night. The name means son of the king. I don't know why, but it felt fitting to me.

Everything is going okay here. I've made some progress on reading about portkeys, but I'll probably need more books if I have a hope of making any. Would you mind ordering some? I tried making one portkey based on my limited knowledge, but I didn't trust it enough to try it out. It's complicated and dangerous magic, and I don't want to mess it up.

I've been going over to the safe house every other day. The wards are shredded, they'll need to be fully replaced, but it's difficult to work around them. The only one that's holding is the one that keeps the muggles away. I've seen them walking by the grounds off in the distance, but they can't see or hear me. The weather wards are the most deteriorated. Sea winds and water battered the house badly over the years. I think I'll have to replace most of the roof.

I don't mind doing it. It feels good to get out of the house and the grounds are beautiful. I was wondering though, when was the last time anyone visited the old manor? I know you said it's been in the Black family for decades, but did you ever live there? Did anyone?

I ask because I found two house elves dead in the basement. They were nearly mummified. I'm not sure how long they've been down there, it seemed like they'd just been abandoned with the house. I decided to bury them near the cliffs. I hope you don't mind, I just felt bad for them. I remember Sirius telling me about the house elf heads that used to hang on the wall in Grimmauld. I could never tell if he was joking or not. I'm assuming, if they ever existed, that they've been removed since I don't see them anywhere.

Speaking of Sirius, have you heard from him or Remus? I'm already worried about them. I don't want to risk contacting them, even with Fitzroy, but I hope they're safe. And I hope

they're not fighting. You can't even understand how awful it was during the last war. They were fighting all the time, but neither of them would talk about it. There were a few moments when Sirius would give me half-truths about what was going on with Remus, but I knew it was worse than he was letting on.

It was eating me up inside last time, and I'm sad that they're still struggling. I know you probably don't care, but you said yourself that you want Sirius to be happy. I think if they could sort themselves out, Remus could be the one to make him happy. I hope they find answers in Norway, but I just want them to come back whole, you know?

Anyway, I'll stop rambling about them. Let me know if you hear from them though. I'd like to know that they're at least safe.

I can't deny that I was wildly entertained by your "falling out" with Parvati. I wish I could have been there to witness it. I hope she's enjoying all the attention. I feel bad for her with Lavender, I'm sure that isn't fun. I hope you find a way to help them all.

How is Ron doing by the way? He only mentioned Lavender a few times while I was with him and Harry, but mostly he just complained that she was trying to snog him too often. Harry seemed very uncomfortable by it, but he also seemed to find it a bit funny. I'll admit, it's a weird thing for a sixteen-year-old to complain about.

I know you said he was a seer. How did you guys discover that? I've never met a seer before. I thought they were a myth. But you and Sirius seemed so sure. Why?

As for Hermione, you did tell me a few things about her, specifically her desire to free all house elves. I'm sure she'll figure out a way one day, especially if she's as hardworking as you say. Though it might be helpful for her to take a break. Perhaps your birthday party idea isn't such a bad one if it gets them all to relax and enjoy themselves. They seemed to be under a lot more pressure than I was at that age. They should blow off some steam.

I'm not sure what to say about Draco. I understand why you're worried about him, but I keep thinking about the way Harry scoffs his name. At first, I thought it was like me and Snivellus, but now I don't think that's quite right. I hated Snape, and I still do, he was awful to Lily, but I never brought him up nearly as much as Harry brings up Draco. I definitely never brought him up while home for Christmas. I'm not sure I thought about Snape when he wasn't in the room with me.

I hope you can find a way to make sure Draco is safe though, but you should watch out for Harry. I don't think he'd be happy to learn that you're working so hard to help him.

Your issues with Luna interest me. I'm not sure I ever knew someone as gentle as you describe her. I can practically hear you accusing me of being too loud to pay attention to someone so quiet. Just know that I'm rolling my eyes at you, and keeping myself from turning this into a howler just so you can hear my voice.

It makes sense though, doesn't it? That someone loud and over the top wouldn't be the ideal candidate for a friendship with Luna. That's probably why Harry likes her. As much as I hate

to admit it, he's not like me. He's not loud or obnoxious (yes, thank you, keep your comments to yourself). He's a quiet kid, even when he's with his friends.

Maybe you should look for someone that's quiet too. Do you know anyone that doesn't have many friends? If you want to make sure she's not lonely, especially since things are heading in the direction they're heading, then you should pick someone who has room in their life for someone like Luna.

Even if she and Harry begin spending more time together, it's not like Harry is going to be around forever.

Speaking of which, how is Harry doing? Do you think he's suspicious? Have there been any side effects? I know you said he's mostly focused on Quidditch, but I don't know how much time you two spend together.

I know you've been watching out for him for a long time, but please keep an extra close eye on him. I've been having nightmares about him. I just want him to come home safe. Merlin, I sound like my father.

I agree with your plan to give him illegal alcohol. There. That's not something my father would have said.

Actually, now that I think about it, he probably would have. He was never very controlling. I didn't have many rules growing up. I wish you could have met him. I think you would have gotten along.

Anyway, I should probably get back to the safe house. Let me know if you can order those books for me.

James

He didn't write "yours," but the thought of writing anything else made his stomach hurt. His name would have to be enough. He missed Regulus with a fierceness that surprised him. They'd gone years without speaking, but now that they were reunited, being separated felt like he was being torn apart.

He swallowed down the feelings, before giving his letter to Fitzroy. He sent him off quickly, telling him not to wait for a response. He still had a lot of work to do that day, and there was no use sitting around doing nothing when he could so easily be distracted by work. He went through the floo to the other Black property without another thought.

It was the week before he got another reply from Regulus. He was elated the moment he received it, making himself dinner so he could eat it while he read the letter, almost as if they were having dinner together.

James,

You'll be pleased to hear that I snuck out of Hogwarts yesterday to go into Hogsmeade and buy several bottles of firewhiskey from the Hog's Head Inn. I'm pretty sure the innkeeper

knows who I am, and that I'm technically not supposed to be old enough to buy alcohol, but he ended up giving it to me.

Lavender and I are on speaking terms again, seems she got over me hurting Parvati pretty quickly, so I asked her to spread the word about Luna's party. She gave me a very confused look when I requested it. I'm not sure that she and Luna have said more than a handful of words to each other, but when I mentioned the alcohol, she finally agreed.

I don't care either way. As long as people are there to celebrate Luna, I'm happy. I should thank you for your advice, by the way, I think you're right about finding a quiet friend for her. I know this might shock you, but I'm actually considering a Slytherin in Harry's year. He's quiet as well, and I'm not sure that he has any other friends. I feel like he and Luna could have a nice friendship. He's been hard to find recently, but I have the map and now that I know who I'm looking for, I think he should be easy to find. It's just a matter of getting him and Luna to talk to each other. I'll keep you updated.

You asked how we knew that Ron was a seer. Honestly, I wasn't sure for a long time. Our old Divinations professor thought he had a knack for it, but it wasn't until after I died that he showed any real skill. According to Sirius, Ron broke into his bedroom to steal a ring, he also found two books in the Grimmauld library that led him to a ritual that he, Hermione, and Harry performed on the veil. The ring ended up being the key, Hermione threw it through the veil, and now both you and I are alive.

After that, Sirius started calling Ron a seer all the time and I just followed suit. What other explanation could there be?

I forgot that I told you about Hermione's thing with the house elves. She's been banging on about it since fourth year. It's been weighing on my mind more than usual recently, especially since I read your letter about the deceased house elves at the other property. I wonder if they were told not to leave without permission. It upsets me that they were forgotten, left to die like they didn't matter.

Best not to mention it to Hermione. That or the house-elf heads we used to have on the wall — yes, I took them down. They always freaked me out when I was a child. I don't think Hermione would appreciate learning about the Black family's treatment of house elves.

I haven't noticed any new side effects with Harry. He seems to be okay. I do think he's suspicious, but he's yet to ask anything and I'm not planning to bring it up. I don't like keeping things from him, but unfortunately, it's important that I do so right now. Plus, I don't want him to worry too much. If I found out that I had Well, I shouldn't write it here, but I just think he's better left in the dark.

I did order new books for you. I should have done that before I left for school. I know it wasn't fair to leave you with so much to do and with no one to help you. I promise that when the term ends I'll take over.

Finally, I have talked to Sirius. He and Remus were heading to Northern Norway the last time we spoke. I think they're all right, I'm sure he'll contact me if he needs to. The mirror doesn't

seem to have any distance limits which is good to know. I was a bit worried about it when they first left.

I won't lie to you though, Sirius did seem stressed. I know you want them to come back together, but I think you should prepare yourself for the possibility of them coming back more broken than when they left. Sometimes people aren't meant to come back to each other. Sometimes things just fall apart and stay that way.

I think all we can hope for is that they both come back alive and with a solution for Harry. Beyond that, I'm not sure.

Hopefully, the books are helpful. Let me know if you need more.

Regulus

P.S. Feel free to read as many romance novels as you wish. They're quite... invigorating at times.

the party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Regulus had never been much of a party planner. Not that he didn't like parties, he would go if he was invited to one, but planning them himself was never on the agenda for him. James, on the other hand, seemed to be nearly an expert on planning parties. Leading up to Luna's birthday on the thirteenth of February, James gave Regulus a whole plethora of advice for her party.

Most of it was alcohol-related, honestly, he should have seen that coming. He vaguely wondered if maybe James and Sirius had had a bit of a problem while they were students, but he decided not to dwell on it. Regulus followed James's advice on buying as much alcohol as possible and providing drinks that were lightly alcoholic but not so strong that they would deter people early on.

Once people get a bit buzzed, then you can introduce the hard stuff. You have to do it during a game though. Most of them won't want to take swigs of fire whiskey right away, but if you raise the stakes a bit, then they'll do it .

It sounded unethical to Regulus, but only a bit. It wasn't like anything was going to happen to them. He was more than prepared to take care of everyone. He planned to stay sober himself, and he'd enlisted the help of multiple house elves, Dobby leading the charge, to keep track of every student that showed up.

He knew what he was doing was a bit odd, perhaps even tiptoeing into the realm of insanity, but he couldn't stop thinking of the way every single school year had been ruined by some terrible catastrophe, how Harry and his friends had been weighed down by responsibilities they should never have had to shoulder.

He just wanted them to enjoy their time at Hogwarts, he wanted Harry to have good memories of school when he looked back. He knew it was a bit dumb, knew that there were more important things for him to focus on, but he couldn't help it.

And maybe, in the very quiet moments, he could admit to himself that it was a bit for him too. He'd spent years trying to protect Harry and all the other children he'd met during his time at Hogwarts, so what if he wanted to see them carefree and happy for just a little bit?

The month leading up to Luna's birthday had been a bit stressful. So much had been happening with all the students that he knew, and the tensions outside the castle walls were only growing stronger. He knew he didn't have much time left, but every day he seemed to get pulled aside into some other nonsense.

As Regulus entered the Room of Requirement and took in the decorations that Dobby and the other elves had put up around the brightly lit room, he couldn't help but think about the

puzzle pieces falling into place for the war on the horizon. The simpleness of life at Hogwarts compared to the world the Dark Lord was trying to build was stark and painful to look at.

“Mr. Regulus Black,” Dobby greeted. He grinned up at him, his little elf hands tucked behind his back. Regulus hadn’t been fond of Dobby originally, with the way he’d gone after Harry, putting him in danger, in a misguided attempt to protect him had rubbed Regulus the wrong way, but over time, he’d found that Dobby wasn’t so bad. There was a part of him that thought he just missed Kreacher, and that Dobby was just filling that empty space. He tried not to dwell on it.

“Hello, Dobby. You’ve done an excellent job,” Regulus complimented. Dobby hopped from one foot to the other.

“Thank you, sir! When will guests be arriving?”

“In less than an hour,” Regulus said. “I’m going to go grab a few things from the dorm. I’ll be back.”

He left the room a moment later, the door vanishing behind him instantly as he walked down the seventh-floor corridor. He wasn’t paying much attention so the hand that shot out from a half-hidden alcove was nearly missed. He didn’t have time to react before he was yanked behind a hanging rug.

“What are you doing?” Draco hissed.

Regulus relaxed immediately, rolling his eyes as he leaned back against the stone wall. Regulus had been visiting the Room of Requirement quite a bit in the past few weeks. Since that first week of term when Draco showed him the broken vanishing cabinet, Regulus had been frequenting the room, researching the cabinet.

He told Draco that he would be the one to fix it. Draco hadn’t been happy about it.

“It’s mine to fix, I have to be the one. He’s going to know if I’m not working on it,” Draco whispered furiously, his face red and blotchy.

“He won’t know anything. I’ll work on it. You’re not to leave the school without telling me though. Do you understand?”

Draco hesitated for only a moment. “What are you going to do?”

“It’s not your responsibility anymore. Go back to your dorm, or better yet go to the Great Hall and get something to eat. You’re too thin.” Regulus chewed on his lip thoughtfully for a second. “Oh, and Draco?”

Draco turned slightly to look at him, he’d already been heading toward the door, accepting Regulus’s help like someone might accept a death sentence.

“Leave Crabbe and Goyle out of it. They clearly look up to you, you don’t want to be the one to lead them into danger.”

“They’ll be involved anyway. Their fathers are Death Eaters.”

“Don’t argue with me.”

Draco hadn’t surprisingly, though he’d been more than a little curious about how Regulus was fairing with the cabinet, visiting him at least once a week to check on the progress. He didn’t know about Luna’s party, it’s not like he would have been invited, so Regulus shouldn’t have been surprised that he’d been followed up to the room.

“I’m not working on the cabinet tonight,” Regulus said. “You can take the night off.” He said it dismissively like someone might shoo away a small child, but he really did wish Draco would take a night off. He could still see the strain around his eyes, the secret he was still keeping weighing on him.

“Then what are you doing?” Draco asked.

“Draco,” Regulus said tiredly.

“He’s asked for an update. Mother said in her last letter to me. He wants to know what progress I’ve made,” Draco said, his words rushed. Regulus could hear what he wasn’t saying. If the Dark Lord wasn’t happy with his updates, then Draco’s mother would pay the price.

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow,” Regulus said much more gently. “We’ll figure it out together.”

Draco gave him a searching look but ultimately nodded. “Why are you up here if not for the cabinet?” he asked, unwilling to drop it.

Regulus sighed. “I’m throwing a birthday party for Luna Lovegood.”

Draco’s eyebrows furrowed slightly. “Loony Lovegood?”

“Please refrain from calling her that.” Draco rolled his eyes, a sneer on his lips. Regulus was almost glad to see it. “I’ve got to go. Go back to your dorm and enjoy your night. We can deal with everything tomorrow. I promise.”

“Fine,” he said sharply, stomping away before Regulus could utter another word. He was very high-strung, though Regulus could understand why. He knew firsthand what it was like to have the Dark Lord breathing down his neck, he couldn’t even imagine how bad it would have been if the Dark Lord started threatening his family. Not that he would have been that worried about his parents, but if he’d threatened Sirius, Regulus probably would have done just about anything.

He hurried back to the dorm. He doubted many students would arrive right on time, but he wanted to be back and prepared in case they did. At the very least, he thought Hermione and Neville would be there right after dinner, they just seemed the type.

He grabbed the gift he’d purchased for Luna out of his trunk — a charmed necklace that would point out the closest magical creature when touched, James had been the one to

suggest it, narrowing in on Luna's interests faster than Regulus could himself — then started heading back to the Room of Requirement. He carefully avoided looking at the unopened note from Dumbledore sitting on his bedside table as he did so.

The headmaster had contacted him a few times since returning to school, but Regulus hadn't been sure what to say to him yet. There had been no progress on getting the unaltered memory from Slughorn, so Regulus didn't exactly have any updates for him, and he hadn't decided what he would tell him — if anything — about Harry being a Horcrux.

He didn't want him to know that they were planning to run. He doubted Dumbledore would support their plan, and though he doubted he would go so far as to sabotage them, Regulus wasn't willing to take the chance. For now, he would bide his time.

The Gryffindor common room was mostly empty, only a few fourth and third-year students milling about. Barely anyone gave him a second glance as he passed through. He was tentatively excited about the evening, if a little nervous.

Make sure you have music playing. One time in second year we threw this party and it was so dead silent that people made fun of us for weeks.

Regulus had borrowed the record player from the Muggle Studies classroom for the event. He doubted it would be missed. Even if Burbage did notice it missing, she liked Regulus enough to let it slide once he returned it, that much he was sure of. He hadn't mentioned it to anyone, not even James, but he was currently the top student in Muggle Studies. He found the topic fascinating. Secretly, he thought it was probably his favorite subject.

When he was alone with his thoughts late at night, he would imagine himself as a muggle, living in a world where he never knew a thing about the Dark Lord, or better yet, one where he never existed, where he was some fictional character, unable to hurt him or anyone he loved. He would imagine all the different jobs he could have as a muggle and the topics he would study. It comforted him.

By the time he made it back to the Room of Requirement, he wasn't alone. Just as he suspected, Hermione and Neville were already there. They were standing out in the corridor, a few feet away from where the door usually was. Both of them had polite smiles on their faces like they were networking at a Ministry event.

"Hey," Regulus called out.

"Is there going to be a lot of students here? You know that I'm a prefect. I can't condone too much... partying," Hermione said instantly, finishing in a lull like she hadn't meant to speak originally and the words had escaped her.

"You're not a prefect tonight, Hermione." He walked past the hidden doorway three times as he spoke. "You're just here to have fun. Let me handle everything else."

Hermione's eyebrows furrowed, a disconcerted look on her face.

“Trust me a bit, yeah?” Regulus said. The door had finally appeared and he reached out to hold it open for both of them.

“I trust you,” Neville said joyfully. Regulus was just glad that he came. He’d barely seen Neville since school started, and he was a bit surprised to feel an emptiness where Neville had once been.

“Thank you, Neville,” Regulus said with a chuckle. “Hermione?”

“Yes, yes, I trust you,” she said exasperatedly. She gasped quietly as they walked into the room. Regulus had to admit, the Room of Requirement had gone above and beyond providing what he needed. The room was circular, similar to the Gryffindor common room, with small, semi-private balconies built into the walls above the main area.

The decorations and magical lighting made it look like they were in the Great Hall, candlelight glittering around the room, shining off of the decor the elves had put up. There were several windows several stories up, but Regulus couldn’t tell if they were real or not. He didn’t know if the room could affect the outside of the castle as it did the inside.

“Who all did you invite?” Neville asked.

“No idea,” Regulus said with a shrug.

“What?” Hermione yelled.

“I just told Lavender to spread it around. I have no idea who she told.”

Hermione gave him a shrewd look. “I thought Lavender wasn’t speaking to you.”

Regulus snickered. “That’s what she wants you to think.”

In all honesty, both Lavender and Parvati had been secretly meeting with him for weeks at that point. Parvati had obviously never been angry with him, but it was bad for her reputation if they were seen together, especially since she was supposed to be ‘moving on’ from him. So the two of them would meet up in secret like they were having a torrid affair.

Luna had begun joining him and Parvati every time they met up. Regulus didn’t know how she kept finding them, but Parvati didn’t seem to mind once Luna confessed that she already knew that their relationship was a farce, so Regulus was happy to let her stay. Especially when Luna started providing names for a list of girls Parvati was making. Her *Could Be Gay* list. Regulus would never admit how funny he found it all.

Lavender was avoiding him in public for a similar reason, not anything to do with finding other gay girls in school, but because she was publicly trying to be supportive of Parvati. Although there was clearly a lot going on in her life that she felt that Regulus needed to be privy to. Mostly it was updates about her and Ron, nothing too scandalous, thank Salazar, but still more relationship details than Regulus cared to know.

“When is everyone else supposed to show up?” Neville asked.

“Probably not for a bit. Most people don’t show up to parties right on time,” Regulus responded. Both Neville and Hermione looked slightly embarrassed, but he’d said it gently enough that they didn’t look too insulted.

He took a deep steadying breath. He wasn’t nervous exactly, but there was a deep desire for everything to go well. He wished he could have snuck James into the castle. Though there would be no way to explain why a Harry Potter lookalike was at the party, Regulus was sure he would feel better if James was with him. He also couldn’t stop thinking about all the missed parties in his first life, all the times he could have gone to a party on James’s arm when they were still together.

His first life self never would have done that, never would have had the courage to face his brother and all of Hogwarts, would have been too worried about the backlash from the other Slytherins and his family, but he couldn’t help picturing it. He missed James, he realized, down to his core. Though they’d been in more constant contact recently, it almost felt like a missing limb not being able to talk to him. He wished he was here with him.

He shook away the thoughts, there was no use getting hampered down by melancholy this early in the night. He needed to focus if he wanted things to go well.

A few hours later, the party was in full swing. More students had come than he’d originally expected, but he wasn’t complaining. The way Luna’s eyes lit up when she realized the party was for her made it all worth it. She wasn’t usually much of a social person, but she seemed to be thriving under the attention.

Regulus, though he was supposed to be watching out for everyone, was also comfortably buzzed. A few shots of fire whiskey early on in the night, and then a few drinks he’d been nursing since then, had kept him relaxed. He leaned against one of the walls, listening to the music streaming out of the record player, and took in the room.

Luna was on one of the balconies with Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones, the two Hufflepuff girls giggling manically at whatever Luna was telling them. He could see them glancing over the side of the balcony and pointing at a group of seventh-year boys crowded together near the door. With a subtle swish of his wand, he cast a standard safety spell just below the balcony, that way if any of them fell or, Merlin forbid, jumped, they would be caught easily.

He spotted Theo Nott next. He’d invited him in hopes of getting him and Luna talking, though so far they’d only spoken once, but Theo seemed to be fitting in rather easily. He was currently locked in an intense conversation with Dean and Seamus, Ginny standing only a few feet away with her arms crossed. She was pursing her lips angrily, a resentful look in her eyes that he didn’t understand.

He searched for Harry next, finding him near one of the staircases speaking to Cho. He wondered vaguely if Harry still had a crush on the girl, he knew that there had been an interest there years ago, but he also assumed there was some confusion given Cedric’s involvement. Regulus could only be glad that annoying man wasn’t there. He wanted Harry to have fun, but not that kind of fun. The very thought made him shiver in disgust.

There was some sort of convoluted drinking game going on in the center of the room. Regulus had tried to facilitate one at first, just as James told him to, and it didn't take long before some of the seventh-years took over for him. He could see that exploding snap was involved in some capacity, but he wasn't sure he really understood the rules.

"I can't believe he's talking to her again," Lavender said suddenly. Regulus blinked blearily at her for a moment. He hadn't noticed her come over. "And right in front of me."

He followed her line of sight, noticing Ron and Hermione talking on the other side of the room. Both of them were holding drinks, much to Regulus's surprise, he never thought Hermione would be the type. She and Ron were a few steps apart, both of them looking awkward and stiff, but there was a light flush on both of their faces.

"They've been friends for a long time," Regulus said uselessly.

"Friends," Lavender scoffed. "Hermione dropped him the moment we started dating."

"That's actually very common for both of them," Regulus replied before he could stop himself. Lavender's eyebrows shot up. "I just mean that their friendship has been through a lot of ups and downs."

Lavender bit down hard on her bottom lip, her eyes still glued to Ron. "Did you and Parvati ever kiss?"

Regulus jolted. "Why do you ask?" His voice was a bit too high-pitched, shock evident in his tone.

Lavender shrugged. "She wouldn't say." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "I just wondered what it felt like for her."

"For her?"

"Yeah, if there was like, a spark or whatever. You know, like in the books. Was there a spark when the two of you kissed?"

"We never kissed," Regulus said, too uncomfortable to even leave it up to interpretation. "But no, I don't think there would have been much of a spark."

Lavender seemed suspicious of him, but he couldn't tell exactly what she was thinking. It was a long moment before she spoke again, and Regulus was already contemplating how to escape the conversation when she said in a low voice, "Do you think the spark is real?"

He hadn't expected to feel pity, but when he finally noticed the small frown tugging at Lavender's lips, her eyes hazy with alcohol, he sighed. "Yes, it's real."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've felt it," he said honestly. "Not with anyone you know."

It really spoke to how torn she was feeling that she didn't try to pry, she didn't even seem intrigued by the relatively interesting gossip he was offering. Her frown deepened.

"Oh," she said quietly. Regulus didn't wait for her to speak again, moving across the room to speak to a few other people, slowly working his way over to Harry.

"Harry said it was your idea to throw this for Luna," Cho said to him once he was next to the two of them, she had a sideways smile on her face that made her look like she'd just finished playing Quidditch, her hair wild and knotted slightly around her face.

"Yes," Regulus responded with a smile. "I wanted her to feel included."

Cho's face softened. "I'm glad you did." Something eased inside him, a worry that had been plaguing him for weeks. Even if Luna didn't have many normal friends, it was good to know that someone was watching out for her, that someone cared. He turned to find the girl in question, noticing that she was missing from the Hufflepuffs she had been speaking with not long before.

He was still looking for her when the fight broke out.

He wasn't close enough to hear how it started but one moment everything was normal and the next minute, Dean and Ginny were shouting at each other. It took Regulus a moment to catch up.

"I don't know why you care," Dean yelled sharply. Seamus was standing next to him with his arms crossed, glaring at Ginny like she was undesirable number one. "You can't lie to me. I know you kissed someone else."

A look of shock crossed Ginny's face, and just for a second, so quick he almost thought he imagined it, her eyes shot over to where he, Harry, and Cho were standing.

"That doesn't give you the right —"

"Fuck you, yes it does," Dean responded. A second later Ron was involved, shoving Dean hard in the chest. Regulus was quick to act after that, seeing the way Seamus was already jumping forward like he was going to insert himself into the argument.

"Ron, stop! Leave him alone!" Ginny was shouting, her voice sharp and loud above the music. Regulus whipped out his wand and shot off a spell to separate the four of them, just a simple barrier that wouldn't hurt anyone.

"Enough," Regulus hissed, stomping over to them. "If you guys are going to fight, take it elsewhere."

Dean gave him a venomous glare, before turning it on Ginny who looked apoplectic.

"There's nothing left to fight about," Ginny said, her voice angry and despondent.

"No, I guess not," Dean responded. Dean was gone a second later, Seamus hurrying after him as they left the room. Ginny huffed angrily, stomping over to a small table where Regulus

had left all the alcohol.

Ron was saying something, Harry was too, but Regulus wasn't listening. He didn't particularly care about the fighting happening between Dean and Ginny, he'd seen their breakup coming a mile away, but he couldn't stop hearing Ginny's words in his head. *There's nothing left to fight about*.

It wasn't like that was what James had said to him, but when their relationship ended, that was how it felt. Regulus knew the moment he got the mark that he was dooming his relationship with James, he knew that he was killing it. He replayed that pain over and over again during the final years of his first life, brutalizing himself with the memories.

Since he'd died, he hadn't thought about it in the same way. He had no one to blame but himself for losing James, and now they were both alive again and it was more painful than he could imagine. He foolishly wanted him back, he wanted to crawl into the safety of James's strong arms and lose himself, but that wasn't an option.

James had loved someone else. He didn't want Regulus in the same way during their first life, and any attention Regulus received from him now would only be out of loneliness. Wouldn't it?

He noticed people going back to some of the drinking games they'd been playing now that the entertainment had died down. Harry was watching them carefully.

"Why don't you join them?" Regulus asked.

Harry flushed. "No, that's all right."

Regulus watched for a second before a realization hit him. "No, you should. I'm going to bed. I'll leave you to it." He didn't wait for Harry to respond, only grinned at him. He didn't say good night to anyone, but he did grab one of the spare bottles of fire whiskey as he snuck out of the room.

He'd intended on staying, on making sure everyone was safe, but he didn't think about the fact that people who knew the truth about him would perceive him as an adult watching over their teenage party. He felt a bit idiotic now.

He called for Dobby when he left the room, told him to make sure everyone was safe, and to get him if anything went wrong, once Dobby agreed, he started the trek back to his dorm room, taking swigs from the fire whiskey bottle as he went. Dean and Seamus were in the common room when he arrived, but he avoided them, walking straight up to the dorm.

"Reggie," Sirius's voice hissed from the mirror. Regulus's heart rate spiked as he answered, worried something bad had happened, but the buzz from the alcohol got stronger as he listened to his brother lament about his problems with Remus. By the time their conversation was over, he was drunk enough that his vision was blurring. He was more of a lightweight than he remembered.

He tucked the mirror away and hid the half-empty bottle of liquor under his bed.

He missed James. He knew he didn't have a right to miss him, and he knew he couldn't afford to lose himself in the feeling, but he figured it was okay to have one night, just one night where he let himself wish that things were different.

Chapter End Notes

the conversation between regulus and sirius takes place in chapter 5 of [breiða sjáflr](#).

the cemetery.

James had been raised as an only child, but he'd never been lonely. His childhood had been filled to the brim with activities and learning. He was homeschooled by his mother, which was not uncommon for children in the wizarding world, but he never felt lacking. Once at Hogwarts, he was constantly surrounded by people, friends and teachers filling his days. Even after the war began, James was never really alone, trapped in a house with his wife and child.

So it was strange to spend so much time alone nowadays. He woke alone, he went to sleep alone. Beyond Regulus's letters, he spent most of his days without communicating with anyone. Some days would go by and he wouldn't utter a single word out loud. It was miserable.

He tried to fill all of his time with tasks, not that he was ever left wanting for them. Learning how to create portkeys was taxing and very tedious, which on top of the excessively complicated wards at the other Black family property, he always had something he could be working on. But there was only so much he could do in a day before a splitting headache would form behind his eyes. He didn't even work this hard on his N.E.W.T.s and that was the hardest he'd ever worked in his life.

He found that Regulus's letters were just about the only thing that kept him going. He looked forward to them the moment he would send off a reply. Some days he would imagine Regulus showing up out of the blue, appearing in the living room just to spend time together. He never did, of course, but James still fantasized about it.

When he woke up on the fourteenth of February, he could barely believe that so much time had already passed. He worried about what Sirius and Remus were doing, hoping they'd found their way together somehow, that they were enjoying the day. His chest ached when he thought about them. They needed each other, and they didn't realize how easy they had it. Though there were issues between them, their path back together was so much clearer than it was for James and Regulus.

Sometimes people aren't meant to come back to each other. Sometimes things just fall apart and stay that way. That's what Regulus wrote to him. Is that how he saw them? James didn't even know how Regulus felt about him, and in all honesty, he felt stupid wondering about it when there were so many dangers, and enemies surrounding them on all sides. Still, though, he wondered.

It was those thoughts that propelled him that morning, pushing him to diverge from his typical routine.

He knew that he was putting himself in danger, that Regulus would be mad at him if he knew what he was planning, but he hoped that Regulus wouldn't find out. Especially given the conversations they had in the past. James was just lonely, and so much of his life felt unsettled now as if he had no place in it. He just wanted a moment to mourn his past life.

After getting dressed and eating breakfast that morning, he cast a quick glamour over himself, nothing too extreme, but hopefully enough that he wouldn't be immediately recognizable, then he concentrated and apparated.

He landed a few blocks from his old cottage in Godric's Hollow. It was raining, the downpour so heavy that it drenched him completely before he could think to cast an Impervius Charm. He summoned an umbrella from the tip of his wand and held it over his shivering frame, the cold water already seeping through his clothes. The village streets were empty, thankfully, but he didn't miss how unnaturally cold it was.

He could remember living here, but the streets still felt foreign to him. Though he'd living in the cottage for a long while, the village was mostly a mystery to him. They had to spend so much time locked away in the cottage that he rarely got the opportunity to explore. He almost wanted to take the opportunity to explore now, but he knew he was already pushing his luck by visiting, it was best not to doddle.

He went to the cemetery first. It had been stipulated in their will that they should be buried there. He'd hoped that it wouldn't happen for a long time, but as the war ramped up, even before they found out about the prophecy, they could feel death breathing at the back of their necks.

The cemetery was completely empty, he doubted anyone else would think to visit someone's grave in the pouring rain. He searched the cemetery slowly, peering through the rain at each name to find the ones he was looking for. It didn't take him long before he saw them, two names etched into the same gravestone.

James Potter and Lily Potter .

It was odd to see his own name there. It felt like it was all a lie, as if he'd never really died, like it had just been a trick. He wondered if there was a place where Regulus's name was carved into stone just as his was. No one else could understand the way he was feeling, no one but Regulus.

He found himself wondering if his old body was resting beneath his feet. Did it disappear after he came back through the veil? Or were there old bones tucked away in a coffin below him?

He glanced at Lily's name and abruptly hoped that his old body was still there. He didn't like the idea of Lily trapped in the ground by herself, under a name that she no longer wanted. Not that she'd ever said anything about changing her name back, but he always wondered if she regretted giving up that piece of herself.

Next to their gravestone was a small wreath of flowers, charmed so that they would never wilt. He knelt down and touched them lightly with the tips of his fingers. The magic that held them together was strong, the smell of it heavy as it swirled into his nostrils. *Regulus .* He'd left them here. When had he come?

He slowly lowered himself fully onto the wet ground and pulled his knees up against his chest, curling under the umbrella that was barely protecting him. The rain was coming in

sideways now, battering the side of his face. He ignored it to the best of his ability.

He couldn't recall the last time he'd said something aloud, it might have been a full week now that he thought about it, and his voice was rough when he finally began to speak.

"Lily," he croaked, his throat tight with welling emotions. Lily, he realized, was the first person to know about him and Regulus, she never judged him for it, she didn't feel betrayed or upset that he'd kept it a secret for as long as he had. She'd accepted who he was and how he felt without question. She was the only one he could talk to. So talk to her he did.

He couldn't say how long he sat there, recounting every single thing that had happened to him. He started from the beginning, explaining his entire relationship with Regulus. When he got to their breakup, he felt his chest clench with regret. He wished he'd tried harder to help Regulus, to get him out, to rescue him. He wished that he'd told Sirius from the start. Sirius would have known what to do. They could have worked together.

When he described how he felt after dying, in those odd moments where he existed only for Regulus's benefit, he started sobbing. At the time, he felt very little, only small peeks of emotion like light slipping through a closed curtain, but now that he was alive, it was like he could see and experience the full range of emotions that he'd felt.

The one that surprised him, that came through like a dagger, was fear. He'd been so afraid, of what he was, of what was happening to him, of what his existence meant for the future. He didn't know he would get another chance to live, and at the time, that didn't matter. He'd been at peace with the fact that he was dead, but now he could feel how afraid he'd been.

He was strung out and exhausted by the time he got to the months he spent trapped in the Department of Mysteries. It was grueling trying to explain what was done to him, but he did it. He told Lily everything, every terrible moment spent there. He told her about the regret he felt that Tom had died there before James could help him and the guilt he felt that Catalina was presumably still trapped there. He wanted to help her, but he didn't know what he could do. He'd barely made it out the first time.

He wanted to ask someone to help him, to get Regulus, Remus, or Sirius to help him break in, but there was still a lot that they didn't know, and asking for help meant telling them everything. There was something humiliating about it, he realized. The idea that he'd been so helpless there made him feel embarrassed. He didn't want anyone else to know the full details. He felt weak when he thought back to those months. He didn't want his friends to see him like that, he especially didn't want Regulus to see him that way.

Finally, he got to how things were now. He told her every single detail of all his conversations with Regulus, recounting everything down to the way his eyebrows twitched when he was trying not to laugh. He told her about the fight with Sirius, about Remus and the way he always seemed tired now, a dullness in his eyes like he always expected the worst.

By the time he was done, his voice was nearly gone. The rain had stopped at some point, but the air was frigid and his body felt so cold. He felt lighter though, as if a weight had been lifted off of him. He desperately wished that Lily could speak back, that she could tell him what to do or how to think about a situation.

“I miss you,” he whispered. “Harry — you would love him. He’s so much like you.”

He sat in silence for a while after, just enjoying the sound of the wind blowing through the trees, but eventually, he grew too cold and decided to leave. His body was stiff from not moving for too long, but he had one more stop before he headed home.

It didn’t take too long to travel down the street toward his cottage. He’d once thought that he would grow old there, that he would get to watch Harry grow up, that he would send Harry off to Hogwarts there. He wished he’d realized how little time he’d get to spend there. He may have appreciated it more.

The cottage was half destroyed, a sign-out front indicating that it was left that way as a testament to the violence of the war. The people who put it up believed it was over, they thought it was finished. How tragic that Voldemort still survived. James was sure that he’d be screaming and crying if he had any emotions left, but he’d used up his quota for the day. He was hollowed out.

The living room was just as he remembered it, if perhaps a bit more organized. Someone must have cleared out some of their personal belongings. He wondered what happened to them. Harry didn’t seem to own any of it.

Above the mantel was a picture from their wedding, Lily and James laughing uproariously at something while Sirius, Remus, and Peter danced around them. They looked happy. He looked happy. He barely remembered that day though, he was sure that he’d blocked it out at some point.

He watched the picture version of Peter for a long moment. Was he already betraying them then? The war wasn’t too terrible yet, it was heading toward them but they weren’t feeling the pressures in the same way some older wizards were. At least, James wasn’t. Maybe it was different for Peter. Maybe he was seeing a side of it that James wasn’t.

He wished he could ask him, that he could get an explanation for why he’d done what he’d done. There had to have been a reason. Sirius seemed to believe that he was just a coward, but wouldn’t there have been better options for a coward? Couldn’t he have run? Left the country and abandoned his friends? Why go to Voldemort directly?

He shook off the thoughts. He might never get answers from Peter, but if he did, it wouldn’t be today. He climbed the stairs slowly, remembering his final moments like someone might remember a dream, through a hazy film of disjointed memory.

He went to his and Lily’s bedroom first. James had started sleeping on the couch near the end of their relationship. Lily said she didn’t mind sharing a bed, that she even found it comforting at times, but he started to feel like he was crowding her. He didn’t sleep much those days anyway, often staying up late into the evening, watching the front porch as his paranoia grew.

He touched the quilt that was still tucked around the bed. It had been a gift from his mother. She’d given it to Lily a few months before their wedding, and Lily was so surprised to receive a gift from someone that she’d started crying. James knew it was because her parents

had died, but he didn't understand that grief until later when his own parents had passed away.

He could still feel his mother's and Lily's magic intertwined on the quilt, charmed to stay warm no matter how cold it became. His eyes burned with unshed tears, but he turned away before they could fall.

He was pushing his luck staying in Godric's Hollow for so long. He needed to leave soon.

He went across the hallway into the nursery. The roof and most of the far wall were blown out, destroyed by the spell that had backfired when Voldemort tried to kill his son. The thought of his infant son alone in this demolished room made him feel sick and dizzy, worthless adrenaline surging through him. Lily had died in this room. Harry had nearly followed her. How long was it before anyone came for him?

The rocking chair his father had given them as a wedding gift was sitting in the corner. Lily used to love that chair, she would sit in it for hours watching Harry sleep. It was then that he remembered why'd he come.

He knew that someone had cleaned out most of the house, though the furniture and a lot of the decor remained, there weren't many other items, but this spot was hidden. It was possible that no one knew to look here. Not even Sirius and Remus knew about it, it was a secret just for Lily and James.

He pulled the rocking chair away from the wall and knelt facing the corner. He brushed his hand against the wallpapered wall, feeling for the small notch he knew was there. Lily had placed it there, she said she loved the idea of hiding things, little secrets to be found one day in the future. It was so whimsical then. It didn't feel whimsical now.

He pushed on the notch and watched as a small opening appeared on the wall. There, in a tiny hidden compartment, was Lily's diary. He pulled it out and carefully tucked it into his jacket. He wanted to look it over, he knew she wouldn't mind, she was always open with him about what she'd written, but he didn't have the time right now. Especially considering the sound of apparition that came from the front yard. Without pausing or thinking, James turned on his heel and apparated back to the front steps of Grimmauld Place.

He didn't know why someone else was at the cottage, but he couldn't stick around to find out. No one could know that he was alive and he doubted he was about to run into an ally.

He walked through the front door of Grimmauld and was a few steps in before he realized he wasn't alone. There was a noise coming from the kitchen, it sounded like someone was opening and closing cabinets looking for something.

Foolishly, his first thought was Regulus. He'd just been wishing that Regulus would come to visit him. It was Valentine's Day after all. That was the excuse he used for why he walked into the kitchen without even bothering to draw his wand.

"Reg?" he called.

The person wasn't Regulus, that much was obvious, but he didn't get a chance to really look at them before he was knocked unconscious.

James jolted back to life as if someone had cast *Rennervate* on him. As he blinked his eyes open, he realized that was exactly what had happened, the tip of a wand directed at his forehead. He tried to move away from it but quickly discovered that that was impossible because he was tied to a chair, incapable of moving even an inch.

"Who are you?" a voice hissed. James finally looked away from the wand pointed at him to see a woman staring down the length of her nose, her face stern and demanding.

"Who am I? Who are you?" James said unhappily. How had she gotten into the house?

Her eyes sparked with anger, her hair rapidly changing from purple to bright red. "You look like Harry, but you're not him. Who. Are. You?"

James tensed. "You know Harry." He shook his head slightly. "Why are you here?"

"I'm asking the questions. What is your name?" Her voice didn't shake, but he did vaguely wonder if this was the first time she'd had to interrogate someone. She was very young.

"James," he responded breathlessly. He just needed to get out of the ropes binding him to the chair. He needed to get to his wand.

"James what?" she asked.

James bit his bottom lip harshly, the woman cast a stinging hex against his neck, causing him to shout in pain. The harsh pain made it feel like he'd been sliced open.

"Don't lie to me, James. How did you get into this house?"

"I live here!" James shouted.

"You think I'm going to believe that?" she asked, her teeth bared.

"Regulus said that no one else could get in. You're the one that broke through the wards."

Her eyes narrowed. He probably shouldn't be shouting at the woman given their respective positions, but his heart was racing and he was so damn cold. "You know Regulus?"

"Of course, I know Regulus. He's my — we're friends." He hoped she didn't dwell on his misstep, Merlin knew he wanted to forget it the moment he said it.

"What is your last name, James?" She said his name like it tasted bad in her mouth.

James sighed unhappily, seeing no other way out but to tell her the truth. What lie could he tell? She already knew he looked like Harry. "Potter."

She hit him with another stinging hex.

“Ah, stop that!”

“I said not to lie to me!”

“I’m not lying!”

“I’m calling Moody!” She said it like a child threatening to tattletale on their sibling, but James panicked all the same.

“No!”

He couldn’t risk the Unspeakables finding him, and if James knew one thing about Moody, it was that he would want to drag James back to the Ministry to question him. They were still in Grimmauld for now and he wanted to keep it that way.

“Who are you? Regulus said only family could get through the wards, not even the Weasleys have access right now,” James rambled.

“I am family,” she replied. James could instantly see the resemblance, that Black family arrogance in the tilt of her jaw.

“You are — oh.”

“Oh?”

“You’re Tonks, aren’t you?”

“You know me?” She looked even more suspicious than she did before he’d spoken. “You were sent here after me.” It wasn’t a question, her knuckles whitened around her wand.

“No! It’s like I said — I live here.”

“James Potter is dead. Everyone in the world knows that. Why would you pretend to be him?”

He was surprised to find that she sounded genuinely curious.

“I’m not pretending,” he admitted. She jabbed her wand against his neck. “I’m not lying. I’m really him.”

She paused for only a second. “Prove it.”

James looked around frantically. “How?”

She didn’t reply, only raised one eyebrow expectantly. James squeezed his eyes shut, already knowing what he was going to have to do. He tucked away his biggest secret, the thing that no one else could know, making sure the Horcrux inside Harry was unreachable then spoke.

“Use Legilimency on me. You’ll see,” he said, already regretting it.

She stared at him for a long moment and he almost thought she was going to refuse, but after a few tense seconds, she pointed her wand between his eyes and said, “Legilimens.”

He could feel her digging around in his memories, seeing his time at Hogwarts, seeing his death, his time with the unspeakables. There was nothing from when he was dead, as if those memories existed somewhere else, somewhere unreachable.

“You’re really James Potter,” she gasped. “You’re alive. How?”

“I don’t know.”

“And Regulus,” she went on as if she hadn’t heard him, “He’s not actually Sirius’s son. He’s his brother. I can’t believe Sirius didn’t tell me.”

“Erm, I think he’s trying to keep it a secret,” James said, knowing exactly why Sirius wouldn’t be confiding in Tonks. “Listen, do you think you could untie me?”

“Were the Unspeakables experimenting on you?” she asked, seemingly unaware that he was even speaking.

“Yes,” he said stiffly. “And I very much don’t appreciate being tied up after that ordeal.”

“Oh,” she said, her face paling. “I’m sorry.” She freed him a moment later, the ropes disappearing into thin air.

“It’s fine. I’m sorry I surprised you,” James said, offering an olive branch that he hoped wouldn’t get him hexed again.

She gave him a look of pity for a second before her face cleared. “They said you were nice.” For a second he thought she was insulting him, but she seemed calmer somehow.

“Who said that?” he asked, smiling softly.

She just shook her head. “Where is everyone? I haven’t heard any updates in more than a month.”

He tilted his head to the side. “What are you expecting updates on?”

A very faint blush appeared on her cheeks for a second. “Remus usually tells me what everyone is doing. He hasn’t been at an Order meeting since October though. Do you know where he is?”

“He’s —” he paused. He probably shouldn’t tell her about the mission, or even mention that there was a mission happening since Regulus didn’t want the Order to know, but there was another option, a path appearing before him like the universe set it up to happen in this exact way. “He’s on a trip with Sirius.”

“A trip?” she asked.

“Yeah, they —” He cringed slightly, already embarrassed by the small lie he was about to tell. “They needed time just the two of them.”

It wasn't that Remus had told James about Tonks, he'd barely spoken about Sirius's cousin at all, but James had gathered from everything Sirius and Regulus had said, that Remus might have been leading Tonks on a bit. Initially, he felt bad for even thinking that, but Remus did have a way of dancing around other people's feelings. He hated that he felt disappointed in his friend, and he'd specifically not asked about it because he didn't want to be even more disappointed in him.

Tonks wasn't much older than James himself, and just in this small interaction, he found that he liked her. Harry liked her too based on a few of their conversations before he left for school. She seemed like a nice person. He didn't want to hurt her, but he wanted her to know the truth.

“What do you mean?” Her eyebrows furrowed, but he could see a dawning look on her face like she already understood

“Well, you know,” James said helplessly. “They're — they're in love. They've been trying to get back together. They were dating before... everything.”

Tonks looked so pale that even her hair turned into a mousy, drab brown color, stripped of all the pigment it had had a moment before. Her mouth dropped open before snapping closed.

“They're in love?” she asked faintly.

“Yeah,” James said, cringing again.

“Oh, Merlin. Remus is — remus and sirius. I told Mum that I didn't think Sirius liked me and I couldn't figure out why, but it's because — Remus made it seem like... I thought he liked me.”

“I'm sorry,” James said quickly. Remus was going to murder him...

Tonks didn't appear to hear him, she was staring off into the distance, horror slowly turning into anger. James felt terrible, he really did, but for Merlin's sake, if Remus wasn't going to say anything, then someone else had to. It was better than her learning it from Sirius.

“I need to get back to work,” she practically yelped.

“You sure you don't want a cup of tea or something?” James asked, already hoping she would decline. His body ached from the cold, and he'd already been through such an ordeal today, he wasn't in any state to entertain.

She didn't respond, just began to head toward the living room.

“Tonks,” James called urgently before she could leave. She turned to look at him, her eyes dazed. “You can't tell anyone that I'm alive. No one can know.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, but after a moment, she nodded.

“Okay,” she said, then she was gone.

the poison.

Regulus's conversation with his brother about Valentine's Day and whether he should get something for Remus haunted him for approximately twelve hours before he gave in to a persistent voice in his head telling him that he shouldn't repeat past mistakes and snuck out of the castle to purchase some candy from Honeydukes. Before he could second guess himself, he sent it to James, attaching a very simple note that just said "Happy Valentine's Day" to it.

"Friends give each other Valentine's Day gifts," Regulus mumbled to himself no less than a hundred times before James sent back a very long, wordy letter with more updates on what he was up to. It included a simple Valentine's Day message back, nothing special or romantic, but the tightness in Regulus's chest released instantly when he read it. He didn't ruin everything with his little gift, that was all he could ask.

His good mood soured as February came to a close though as Sirius's mirror calls abruptly ended. He'd been reliably calling him every few days, often more frequently than that, but the calls stopped a few days after Valentine's Day.

He waited a full week before trying to call him. "Sirius," he hissed into the mirror, but no one appeared. It was silent.

Every day that passed made him more tense. He was still trying to juggle everything at Hogwarts, his classwork which felt more draining than it had the first time around, the stressors from Draco who was growing more nervous with every passing second, and the myriad of teenage angst happening in the wings of his life.

His only solace was in his letters to James. They were writing nearly every day, mostly about silly things now. The updates about their lives felt too stressful to talk about regularly, so they both individually decided to focus on topics that barely mattered. For instance, they exchanged letters for a full five days exclusively about the romance novels that Parvati and Lavender had given to Regulus that James was now reading.

It was oddly relaxing. He felt like a normal wizard talking with his friend about muggle novels. It made him feel like there weren't any bigger problems in his life. Not to mention that there was always this undertone to their letters that made Regulus's hands shake slightly, something swelling in his chest, something he wasn't ready to identify yet.

By the time March arrived, Regulus was starting to wonder if he should bring Kreacher back for the specific purpose of finding Sirius and Remus. He might be able to. If they were still alive. Every time that thought entered his head, he would have to physically shake it off.

Sirius was alive.

He had to be.

There was no world where Regulus lost Sirius, not like this, especially with the loss of any hope of saving Harry. That was just too much. That wouldn't happen to him.

It couldn't.

The Kreacher thought was an irritating one because it often led him into a cyclical thought pattern that he couldn't escape. Kreacher had betrayed him, he'd gone out of his way to put Sirius in danger, Sirius had nearly died because of it, Regulus really had died. Nothing had changed though, he was sure that Kreacher was still out there somewhere hating Sirius. How could Regulus believe that Kreacher would help bring him home safely? He was still frustrated doing nothing though.

He'd been having nightmares consistently for weeks and the last night of February was no different, so when he woke late on the first of March, he felt like his eyes were so dry that they would shrivel up and fall out of his skull. The nightmares were just a blur of panic and feverish sweating, so he did his best to shake off the memories of them.

He'd overslept so he only had a bit of time before he had to head to apparition lessons, a task that was becoming extremely tedious given how many times he'd purposefully messed up just to keep the instructors from paying attention to him.

"Come on, if you don't hurry you'll have to apparate on an empty stomach," Regulus heard Ron say. He climbed out of bed, glancing at Ron who smiled and thanked him for the gift Regulus had charmed to appear on his bed that morning: an enchanted Quaffle that he could use to practice his Keeper skills. Both he and Harry were already dressed.

"Happy birthday," Regulus said quickly before heading into the bathroom. Neville, Seamus, and Dean were all missing, having already left for breakfast. He dressed quickly, throwing on his most comfortable outfit before walking back into the dorm.

"Ready?" Harry was saying, already walking toward the door to leave, but Ron didn't reply. It didn't appear that he was listening, he was staring out at the rain with a dazed look on his face. Harry and Regulus made eye contact, both of them furrowing their eyebrows. Ron had seemed normal just a moment ago.

"Ron?" Regulus asked, his stomach sinking worryingly.

"I'm not hungry," Ron said.

"What?" Harry said incredulously. "I thought you just said —"

"Well, all right," Ron said with a massive sigh, like even paying attention to Harry's words was a chore, "I'll come down with you, but I don't want to eat."

Regulus chuckled nervously, though Harry just looked suspicious.

"You've just eaten half a box of Chocolate Cauldrons, haven't you?"

Ron sighed again. Regulus didn't think he'd ever heard someone sigh so much.

“It’s not that. You... you wouldn’t understand,” he said, sticking out his bottom lip in a pout.

“Wouldn’t understand what?” Regulus asked, interrupting whatever was about to come out of Harry’s mouth. Ron didn’t even look at him, just threw his arms up in the air like he couldn’t believe they were questioning him.

“I can’t stand it!” he shouted suddenly.

“You can’t stand what?” Harry asked, looking startled.

“I can’t stop thinking about her!” Ron replied, the words tearing out of his throat like he was on the brink of a breakdown. Regulus struggled to understand what was going on. A moment ago, Ron had seemed completely fine, and now he looked like he was on the verge of tears. Not to mention that Regulus had no idea who he could possibly be talking about considering he and Lavender were on a very steady decline.

“I don’t think she knows I exist,” Ron said with a desperation that seemed largely incongruent with what was going on. There was no way that could be about Lavender, though Regulus was starting to suspect that Lavender wished she didn’t know Ron existed.

“Ron, who are you talking about?” Regulus asked, now deeply worried.

Ron’s face slackened, his eyes appearing dazed and disconnected. “Romilda Vane.”

“Oh no,” Regulus muttered instantly.

“This is a joke, right? You’re joking,” Harry said at the same time.

“I think... Harry, I think I love her,” Ron said.

After that, it was fairly easy to parse out what had happened. They discovered a box of Chocolate Cauldrons that Romilda had given Harry shortly before Christmas that had been tossed on the ground and mixed with Ron’s gifts that morning when Harry went digging in his trunk looking for the map. The chocolates were filled with a love potion that had clearly grown stronger over the last few months, as love potions were wont to do, developing over time so that when the target finally ingested them, they would be overcome.

“We need to get him an antidote,” Regulus whispered. It wouldn’t help Ron if he overheard. Regulus had never seen someone under the effects of a love potion, but he’d read about the effects and he knew it was common for them to fight all attempts to free them from the potion.

“Do you know how to brew one?” Harry asked, his eyebrows furrowed in worry.

Regulus nearly nodded, he probably could brew one though he’d never done it before, but he stopped himself. In the last few months, they’d been working to get Harry closer to Slughorn, to butter up the man so it would be easier to ask for the memory that they needed. This was the perfect opportunity for them to speak with him in a small setting in a way that wouldn’t feel suspicious.

“I have an idea.”

Getting Ron down to Slughorn’s office wasn’t particularly difficult. Harry just told him that he was planning on bringing him to Romilda Vane and Ron was quick to follow. They did run into Lavender on the way there, and though she looked like she was waiting for Ron, when Ron told her about their plan to introduce him to Romilda, Lavender only looked confused.

“He’s under a love potion,” Regulus whispered to her as Ron and Harry headed farther down the hallway. She only rolled her eyes.

“Whatever,” she mumbled. “I had other plans later anyway.”

That had been happening more and more since Luna’s party. It was like Lavender was trying to seek him out on principle alone like she just needed to fulfill some relationship quota, but he could see her losing interest. Ron couldn’t have cared less, in Regulus’s opinion. He seemed more interested in Quidditch than he ever did in Lavender.

Slughorn was quick to let them in, pleased to see his favorite student at his door bright and early on a Saturday. He whipped up the antidote in no time, Ron only managing to ask where Romilda was three times before he drank it.

The moment he swallowed the potion, his face fell into one of horror. Though Harry was grinning and Slughorn was chuckling, Regulus couldn’t shake off a feeling of horror of his own. Romilda had intended that for Harry, she had planned to strip him of all his autonomy and turn him into a puppet who only existed for her entertainment. What would Ron or Harry have let Romilda do to her?

The fact that Ron had eaten the Chocolate Cauldrons when both Harry and Regulus were around was pure luck. If they hadn’t been there, who knew what would have happened? It made Regulus sick to think about though. How love potions hadn’t been banned yet, he had no idea. He thought about the love potions he’d heard about at the twins’ shop. He would need to contact them. He wasn’t going to help pay for something that could do this to a person.

“Pick-me-up, that’s what he needs,” Slughorn said, interrupting Regulus’s thought process. He ticked through a couple of different options before settling on a bottle of oak-matured mead that he’d been planning to give to Dumbledore for Christmas.

He poured Harry a glass, then one for Regulus, and before he could even start to pour one for Ron, Regulus tipped his glass back and swallowed the mead. He couldn’t shake the feeling of tightness in his chest after seeing Ron like that. He’d been so helpless.

It took half a heartbeat for Regulus to realize something was wrong. His mouth burned suddenly and before he could process a single thought, his world went dark, his chest caving in on itself.

Regulus was dragged into consciousness as if someone had hooked him like a fish and was hauling him to his death. His throat felt like it had been torn to shreds, he was sure of it, because before he could even swallow he could sense the damage. He hadn't opened his eyes yet, but he must have been moving around because suddenly there was the rim of a glass at his lips and a soothing potion was spilling down his throat.

The relief was instant, a gasp spilling out of him in response. He finally blinked his eyes open as the burning in his chest subsided.

He was in the Hospital Wing which in retrospect he should have suspected, at this point in his life he was either waking up in a hospital bed or he was dead, there was no in-between. It was dark, the soft pattering of rain dancing against the windows, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust.

A messy nest of white-blond hair caught his eye. He didn't think he'd ever seen Draco's hair look so disheveled, but it was standing up at odd angles like Draco had been repeatedly fussing with it. He was in the process of setting down the cup he was holding when Regulus finally got a good look at him.

The dark circles under his eyes were more prominent than Regulus had ever seen them, his eyes looked like they were sunken into his skull. And though he obviously knew that Regulus was awake, he was actively avoiding meeting his eyes.

"Draco?" Regulus said, his voice scratchy. He coughed twice to clear it. "Draco?" he repeated.

Draco didn't reply and he didn't look up. Regulus felt his heart sink, his memories rapidly catching up to the present moment, the memory of drinking Slughorn's mead sweeping in.

"Was I poisoned?" Regulus asked. He looked around quickly, discovering a collection of gifts and cards set up at the foot of his bed. He wondered how long he'd been out for. Had Sirius tried to contact him while he was gone? Had James?

He looked over at Draco again. He was fidgeting with the end of his sleeve, and though he must have felt Regulus's eyes boring into him, he didn't react. His eyes were darting around rapidly, looking anywhere but at Regulus. Regulus felt his heart sink, dropping his head down on the pillow and staring up at the ceiling.

"It was you, wasn't it?" he whispered. Slughorn mentioning that he was going to give the mead to Dumbledore all made sense now. That was what Draco was tasked to do. The Dark Lord wanted him to kill Dumbledore. In retrospect, Regulus should have figured it out on his own. Dumbledore was the biggest threat to the Dark Lord's power and why not give that impossible task to a child he was trying to humiliate?

"Slughorn wasn't supposed to keep it," Draco whispered after a long few moments. His words were so quiet that they sounded like they'd been spoken years in the past, only echoing now as regret tumbled around them.

Regulus nodded, still staring at the ceiling. "Okay," Regulus said.

“Okay?” Draco asked.

“I asked you before to tell me everything,” Regulus said stiffly, noticing Draco flinch slightly. “I knew you were keeping something else from me, and I didn’t push. I gave you time to come to me on your own and you didn’t.”

Draco made a small aborted sound. Regulus highly doubted that he was used to being spoken to like this. Knowing Lucius and Narcissa, this kind of tone was likely very foreign to Draco’s ears. He didn’t argue back though, he didn’t say anything.

“I have given you as much time as I can, Draco,” Regulus said, finally looking up at him, their eyes — so similar in color it was impossible to miss that they were related — met with a sharpness that Regulus was sure Draco could feel. “I need to know everything. Anything else you’re keeping from me, I need to know.”

Draco shook his head rapidly. “There isn’t anything else.”

“Draco.”

“There isn’t!” he hissed indignantly. “That was it. It was — I thought it would just fix the — there isn’t anything else.”

“Do you not understand the seriousness of what you’ve done?” Regulus said, sitting up quickly so that his face was level with Draco’s. “I nearly died. I am your *only* ally and you almost killed me.”

Draco’s face, already sallow, paled into a whiteness that Regulus had never seen on a living person.

“You will tell me everything or I’ll force you to.”

“Force me?”

“Yes,” Regulus said.

“I can’t,” Draco said frantically.

“What else could you possibly be keeping from me? What else don’t I know?”

Draco shook his head. He opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment, Pomfrey’s door opened, a small clicking sound like she was checking to see where all the racket was coming from. Draco jumped to his feet and, before Regulus could speak, scurried out of the Hospital Wing.

He vanished just in time because right as the door closed behind him, Pomfrey entered the wing, bustling over toward Regulus in a way that meant she was all business.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” she said, casting a diagnostic spell over him.

“How long have I been asleep?” Regulus asked.

“A few days,” she said distractedly. She was dressed in a robe, her hair tied up in a piece of silk. She must have been sleeping, he thought. “Here, drink th—” She glanced at the now empty glass that Draco had been holding. “Oh, you’ve already had it.”

He listened as she went over what had happened to him — he’d be poisoned, she said, but he already knew that — and before he knew it, she was heading back toward her room, the instructions for him to rest given in that curt, short voice that she only used when she was worried.

He blew out a long breath, struggling to process everything that had just happened. The guilt on Draco’s face was almost hard to look at. He was only just beginning to search his feelings when he saw the air near him shimmer and shift. He knew what he would see before he saw it, Harry’s stony face appearing out of nothing like an omen of death.

“Harry,” he said carefully. Harry’s eyes were narrowed dangerously, a glint in his eyes like his suspicions had been confirmed. “What are you doing here?”

He knew instantly that it was the wrong same to say, Harry’s stormy face growing even angrier. Regulus could feel his magic snapping around them like a lightning storm. He sat up carefully, dragging himself up so that he was propped up against his pillows.

“What are you helping Draco do?” Harry asked.

Regulus sighed. “Harry.”

“Don’t,” Harry said sharply. “I’ve been watching you for months.” That surprised Regulus, not just because he’d thought Harry would have dropped it by now given that he hadn’t been mentioning it, but also because it spoke directly to how much Harry trusted him.

“I told you that I was going to —”

“He’s a Death Eater,” Harry said.

“No,” Regulus lied.

“Is that why you’re helping him?”

Regulus paused, the words he was about to speak catching in his throat. “What?” he breathed.

Harry looked so angry and so betrayed, Regulus’s chest clenched. “Are you — You’re helping Voldemort.”

Regulus flinched like he’d been slapped. “No, Harry, I would never do that.”

“Draco is a Death Eater,” he repeated, “and you’re helping him. You’re protecting him.”

“I’m not helping him,” Regulus said, though it wasn’t exactly true, but he wasn’t helping the Dark Lord. He wouldn’t do that, he was just trying to save Draco from what happened to

him. He couldn't change his past, he couldn't remove the mark branded on his arm, but he could save Draco from the same fate.

"I know you've been lying to me," Harry said harshly. Regulus opened his mouth but snapped it shut when Harry threw a closed letter down onto his stomach.

"What is that?" Regulus asked without reaching for it.

"They tried to contact Sirius, you know, your *father*," Harry spat, "but the owl came back. They couldn't find him."

"They couldn't —" Regulus said faintly, his heart starting to race.

"Where is he?" Harry asked. "I know you've been talking to him in secret. I know something is happening. You've been lying to me about it and you've been lying to me about Draco."

"Harry —"

"Just tell me!" he shouted, his voice desperate and angry, angrier than Regulus had ever heard it. "Please," he added, a pleading tone that made tears spring to Regulus's eyes. It was like James all over again, the distrust, the desperation, the begging. Guilt worse than anything he'd ever experienced flooded him.

"Sirius and Remus went looking for a rare ritual back in January," Regulus whispered.

"Why? What does the ritual do?" Harry asked. Regulus felt panic seize him and he shook his head on instinct. Harry ground his teeth together so loudly that Regulus could hear it. He didn't speak, he didn't say a single word, he just covered himself with the invisibility cloak and left.

Regulus waited for him to come back, though he didn't know what he would say. He couldn't tell Harry about the Horcrux and he couldn't explain the purpose of the ritual without saying it was for Harry. Not to mention that if Sirius was dead, or severely injured, or not coming back for some other specified reason, Regulus never wanted Harry to blame himself and he knew that if Harry knew why Sirius had left, he would blame himself for him never returning.

In the blink of an eye, the tight rope he had been walking for months had snapped beneath him and now he felt like he was tumbling to the unforgiving rocks below. Draco was, Merlin knows where, panicking about the massive pressures sitting on his shoulders, and though Regulus was doing everything he could to support him, he knew that Draco could turn on him at any moment. One wrong move and everything he'd been trying to do with Draco could be for nothing.

Would his near-death experience be the catalyst for Draco losing it? That didn't even include the fact that Harry now knew that his suspicions about Draco were true. Regulus had been doing his best to keep Harry from getting obsessed with Draco, he should have known that he would fail.

Would Harry tell someone? Regulus had no way of knowing. He was unpredictable right now.

He eventually fell back asleep, and he woke periodically over the next two weeks as people came to visit him, but Draco never came back and neither did Harry.

the birthday.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James Dad,

When was the last time you heard from Regulus? Has he told you that he's helping Malfoy? What are they doing together? Regulus won't tell me anything, and then he almost died because of Malfoy. I'm not sure what he did to cause it ~~but Regulus is only alive because~~ . He's not telling me anything at all. He's been lying this entire time.

Did you know that Sirius is missing? Regulus said he and Remus went on a trip together and that they were looking for some kind of a ritual, but Regulus wouldn't tell me what the ritual is for. Then McGonagall tried to send Sirius a letter and it came back because the owl couldn't find him. Do you know what he and Remus were looking for? Do you think something happened to him?

I thought Regulus would tell me if Sirius was in danger, but apparently not. He just dismisses me like I'm some dumb kid, which I'm not , I'm practically an adult at this point.

~~Do you think he's only helping Draco because he's~~

Write me back when you can.

Harry

James wished he didn't love the fact that Harry had written him a letter and addressed it to "Dad." He knew he was likely being manipulated by his kid, but it was a bit difficult to care when he felt so warmed by the prospect of Harry sending him a letter at all. Besides, there was something so quintessentially *Regulus* about being manipulated through a letter. He really learned from the best.

Regulus had warned him about Harry's obsession with Draco Malfoy, and though he did know that Regulus was trying to protect them, that he'd done illegal stuff to do so, he didn't actually know the full details. He didn't know about the poisoning though and the idea of it made him feel sick to his stomach.

He had still been riding the high of receiving a Valentine's Day gift from Regulus even as March began that he hadn't been expecting to receive such a distressing letter. He'd been shocked to receive anything at all, and though the message was simple, he was still ridiculously pleased by it. Harry's letter had made it all come crashing down.

Regulus had nearly died? Again? Sometimes it felt like someone was plotting against them. It didn't seem right that he should be in such constant danger without a moment of rest. Was he purposefully putting himself in danger? He was sure Regulus didn't face this many hazards

while they were at Hogwarts together. Unless somehow they did and Regulus was just very good at keeping those secrets to himself.

He shook off the idea of Regulus and secret keeping, that was a treacherous road to go down. And now Sirius and Remus were missing...

He couldn't even bring himself to think about what could possibly be happening to them. He was so helpless.

He wrote to Regulus right away, but at the last second, scrapped his first letter where he'd asked directly about the poisoning, Sirius's disappearance, and Harry's suspicion. He wasn't proud of it, but he felt this incessant possessiveness when he thought about Harry's letter. He was finally getting a chance to talk to Harry, even if it was exclusively about his obsessions and worries, and he wasn't about to throw it away by bringing it up to Regulus immediately.

Instead, he wrote a second letter updating Regulus about the Black family property he'd been working on. He'd finally managed to strip it of most of the damaged wards and was now slowly rebuilding them from the ground up. It was difficult work, often leaving him singed by magic and physically exhausted by the time he got back to Grimmauld.

His letters from Regulus were just about the only thing keeping him sane. Well, that and the surprising addition of Tonks into his daily routine. He hadn't expected to see her again, at least not for a while, but she'd returned to Grimmauld only two days after their interaction.

She'd demanded to know everything about Sirius and Remus's relationship. James didn't feel comfortable sharing too much about it, but he told her the basics, each detail seemed to make her face fall a little further.

"I'm sorry," James said, cringing slightly as he said it.

"I just can't believe that no one told me," she breathed, disappointment heavy in her voice. James didn't know what to say, he'd never been the best at comforting people that weren't Sirius, Regulus, Remus, or Peter. Everyone else was a mystery to him. "Tell me about Regulus."

James jumped slightly, he hadn't been expecting her to speak after such a long silence. "What?"

She tilted her head slightly, searching his face quizzically. "I saw in your memories about you and Regulus. You two used to date?"

James felt his face grow hot, blushing despite himself. "Oh, well, yes, we did."

Tonks' eyes narrowed dramatically, a smirk replacing the forlorn frown she'd been wearing. "You still love him."

James sighed tragically. "It's pretty hard not to," he said matter-of-factly. "Have you seen him?"

Tonks just shrugged. "Not my type," she said, "but then again, we're related."

“Oh, right,” he replied, chuckling awkwardly.

He did end up telling her about him and Regulus, and the way their relationship and break up had shaped every part of his life. He left out anything he thought could be a secret, even if he wasn't sure, but he was free about his feelings, oddly relieved to explain it to someone who had no stake in the story.

He'd wanted to talk to Sirius about it, but Sirius had been so upset with him before he left. Rightly so, he wasn't denying that, but it had made it impossible for him to go to Sirius. It frustrated him a little, all he wanted was to talk to his friend, the person who knew him best, and he couldn't do it. He wished he'd taken the opportunity to talk to Remus more before they both left, but at the time, it felt wrong to burden him with his relationship woes when he was so obviously suffering under the weight of his own.

Tonks began visiting regularly after that, coming to see him every couple of days, often bringing muggle takeout and news from the outside world. The good kind of news too, not the torrid updates about the state of the world, but inter-department drama at the Ministry and rumors she would hear during her job as an Auror. He never mentioned her visits to Regulus though, he didn't know how Regulus would feel about her knowing he was there.

He liked Tonks though. They weren't very far apart in age and he found that they had a similar sense of humor. It made her easy to spend time with, and though he was clearly dealing with a lot, she never pressured him to talk about anything he wasn't ready to discuss, she just let him be. He enjoyed it.

Of course, the day that Harry's letter came made Tonks' presence seem overbearing. It wasn't her fault, but when she asked about the letter, assuming that it was from Regulus, James felt the unshakeable desire to lie.

“Yeah, just some more updates,” he replied to her question, letting out a soft chuckle. He noticed her eyebrows furrow slightly, but she didn't question him. He was relieved by that, unsure of how he would have reacted if she pressed him for information.

He kept Harry's letter close to his chest in the weeks after that, but he made no move to find out if the information was true. Regulus continued to write him nearly every day, but he never mentioned Sirius or the poisoning even once.

He did write Harry back though and received an even longer letter detailing every piece of oddness he'd noticed about Draco's behavior over the last few months. He'd recounted word for word the conversation he'd heard between Draco and Regulus right after Regulus nearly died. James had to admit it all sounded pretty convincing. If he didn't already know that Regulus was trying desperately to save Draco from the life he'd lived then he would feel exactly as Harry did.

Though he saw so much of Regulus and Lily in Harry, his bullheadedness when dealing with his problems definitely came from James. He was reminded of the way he'd ended things with Regulus all those years ago, the way the hurt of Regulus avoiding him cut deeper than the knowledge that Regulus would align himself with someone so vile.

He'd been too focused on his emotional reactions then to see how hurt he would be to not have Regulus in his life anymore. He'd done everything in his power to bury that hurt under self-righteous anger. He'd forced himself to move on, letting himself get close to Lily, convincing himself that his love for her wasn't permanently shaped by the Regulus-shaped hole in his chest.

He could see so much of his denial and his avoidance in the way Harry's quill dug into the parchment every time he wrote to James, pressing so hard that he would nearly tear through the page at times.

He felt nothing but sympathy for his son. It made it so much worse knowing that he was right about Draco's actions but being unable to say anything. He couldn't confirm it, it would only make things worse, but it felt wrong to lie to him, listening to his anxieties and responding like they were just having a normal conversation.

As the month stretched on, his worry about Regulus, Harry, Sirius, and Remus all grew. There was no news in Regulus's letters, he didn't even write Sirius's name anymore. James wanted to ask about it so badly, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not yet. He was enjoying the peace between them, he just needed a little longer.

He woke on the twenty-seventh of March to the smell of bacon cooking. He jumped out of bed feeling like a little kid on Christmas morning, rushing to throw on some easy clothes and hurrying down the stairs.

His face fell when he burst through the kitchen door.

"Well, you don't have to look so disappointed," Tonks said with a sideways grin, a little gleam of pity in her eyes. He cringed, rubbing his eyes to hide his embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled sleepily, his brain just catching up to the fact that he'd just woken up.

"It's all right," Tonks said easily. "It's your birthday, you get a pass."

"Did you cook me breakfast?" he asked, tilting his head slightly.

"Yeah, no one should cook for themselves on their birthday."

He grinned, swallowing down the disappointment that still sat heavy on his chest, and walked over to pull out a seat at the table. "Thanks for coming over," James said. Tonks smiled softly.

"No problem," she said. They ate together slowly, chatting about the most recent case she'd been assigned at work. She was frustrated about being sidelined again, she felt like they weren't taking her seriously, but she couldn't figure out why. James thought it had something to do with the bumbling energy she gave off, but he would never have said that out loud. He knew she was capable, it was just that looks could be deceiving.

He realized as he worked through his breakfast that there was a reason she was always bringing takeout over for him. She wasn't exactly skilled at cooking. Almost everything on his plate was either undercooked or overcooked. He still ate all of it though, he didn't want her to feel bad, and he appreciated that she thought of him.

"How did you know it was my birthday?" he asked when they were nearly finished. He hadn't thought of it initially, but it dawned on him eventually that unlike every other year of his life, he hadn't gone overboard mentioning his upcoming birthday for the month leading up to it. Merlin, he'd been so obnoxious before.

"I looked it up," Tonks said with a shrug.

"You looked it up?" James asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

"Yeah." She nodded. "You're famous, or tangentially famous because of your son, so all I had to do was look for it and I found it."

"Oh," he mumbled, unsure of how to feel about that revelation. "Why?"

"Why what?" she asked.

"Why'd you look it up?"

Tonks paused for a second, searching his face before a look of sympathy crossed over her ever-changing features. "I didn't want to miss it. I didn't know if anyone else would be here to celebrate if it was coming up."

"Oh," he said again, unusually touched by the sentiment. "Thank you."

She grinned, all her teeth on display, and nodded again like it was that easy, like it wasn't a big deal to secretly look up someone's birthday just to make sure they weren't alone. He was about to ask about her plans for the rest of the day, breakfast almost completely eaten, when he heard a sound from somewhere else in the house.

It took him a second to recognize what he was hearing — the sound of the front door opening and closing.

Tonks looked alert immediately, like a rabbit freezing when a predator was nearby, but she recovered quickly, grabbing her wand and standing as if preparing for a fight. James stood as well, his wand tucked into his pocket where he wrapped his fingers tightly around it. There were only a handful of people who should have been able to get through the wards, but he'd been surprised by Tonks before, he didn't know who else had been forgotten.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway made them both stop breathing and as the door opened, Tonks pointed her wand sharply in front of her.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw who it was. He should have guessed it would be Regulus.

Regulus came into the kitchen looking oddly nervous, and when he spotted Tonks pointing a wand at him, his face dropped into one of shock, recovering only a second later, his wand already out.

“Regulus,” James breathed, almost involuntarily, before anything could happen. The surprise on Regulus’s face was evident, but when his eyes slid to James, something else sparked there. Suspicion maybe. Or even jealousy. Although, maybe that was just hopeful thinking on his part.

“James,” he replied. The sound of his name on Regulus’s lips rushed down his spine, settling at the base and catching fire. “Tonks,” he greeted, the name coming out much stiffer than James’s had.

“Oh, I see,” Tonks whispered, so quietly that James was sure Regulus wouldn’t have been able to hear it. She dropped her wand, tucking it into her pocket and showing her empty hands in front of her. “Cousin.” She smiled charmingly.

Regulus’s eyebrows furrowed slightly. “Tonks,” he said again, this time with a little confusion in his voice.

“I was just leaving actually,” she said quickly. James glanced over at her surprised. “We’ll have to catch up another time.”

Regulus’s eyebrows furrowed even further. “Uh, yeah, okay,” he said as she walked towards him. He stepped out of the way of the door, looking back over at James and searching for answers. When Tonks stepped out of his view, she turned to make eye contact with James one more time, smiling broadly and throwing up two thumbs up.

James couldn’t help the muffled laugh he let out, causing Regulus to turn and look behind him, but Tonks was already gone, rushing out of the kitchen toward the living room. He looked annoyed when he turned back to James.

“Why is Tonks here?” he said, his voice sharp and irritated. “No one is supposed to know you’re alive.”

“Oh, right,” he said, forgetting for an instance that Regulus had no idea about his friendship with Tonks. “Well, what happened was —”

“Did she cook you breakfast?” Regulus asked, looking down at the empty plates like they were going to spring to life and attack him.

“Yes,” James said with a nod. “For my birthday.”

Regulus looked so betrayed that James almost laughed, though it wasn’t funny exactly. It just seemed ridiculous to James given the circumstances. Then he remembered the first conversation he’d had with the woman and the weeks of unhappy looks he’d spotted from Sirius before they left, and any possible humor from the situation evaporated.

“She’s just my friend,” he said quickly, throwing out his hands like Regulus was going to turn his back and leave if he didn’t. “She discovered me by accident, the wards still let her in, but she’s been visiting me periodically because I don’t have anyone else to talk to.”

Regulus still looked hurt and James was pretty sure he was only a few steps away from pouting and he knew he wouldn’t be able to handle that, so he added, “I was going to mention it in my letters, but I knew that no one was supposed to find me here. I wasn’t keeping it a secret for some nefarious reason.”

Regulus’s hurt look dropped into one of exasperation. “It’s fine, James,” he said dismissively, though a second ago it clearly wasn’t. “It makes sense, you and Tonks are the same age, right?”

“No,” James said, shaking his head. “Nope. We barely know each other.”

“James,” he said, rolling his eyes, clearly not believing him.

“I’m not Remus, I would never date your cousin,” James said, rushing to be as clear as possible. He didn’t want this to fester between them as it had between Remus and Sirius. Plus he liked Tonks, he wanted to keep her as a friend, and he couldn’t do that if it was going to make Regulus unhappy. Regulus had had more than enough unhappiness in his life, and James did not want to add to it.

“Okay, fine,” Regulus said, finally looking mildly entertained. “I believe you.” He paused and then seemed to realize something. “Wait, she looked at me like — does she know who I am?”

“Er, yeah,” James said awkwardly, cringing slightly. “I had to show her some memories to prove who I was, given that I’m supposed to be dead and everything. I didn’t show her anything about Harry, or the house, or anything like that, but she saw some of... our memories.”

“Our memories?” Regulus grew pale, his eyes wide.

“Not *those* memories,” James said. *I think*, he added in his head. He couldn’t be sure, but he didn’t want to think about it.

“Oh,” Regulus said. “Okay. Well, that’s all right then, I guess.” He chewed on his bottom lip for a second. “She’s trustworthy I think. I don’t think she’d tell anyone you were here.”

“She’s known for weeks and hasn’t told anyone yet. We’re friends,” he said. One of Regulus’s eyebrows twitched and James could practically hear the hurtful words he was keeping himself from saying: *We both know what happened last time you trusted a friend*. He was glad Regulus showed such restraint in keeping the words to himself, even if they both felt them.

“Weeks?” he asked finally. “How long has she known?”

“Erm,” James mumbled, “since Valentine’s Day.”

“Valentine’s Day?” Regulus asked loudly.

“Yeah, I was out at — I was out and when I came back she was in the house looking for Remus. I think she was still able to get in cause she’s family, something about the wards not blocking her out like they did for everyone else. Did I already say that?”

Regulus looked unsettled and confused, but there was something else there too, a disquiet that made James nervous. “Where were you?”

“Huh?” James asked, his heart rate picking up.

“You said you were out,” Regulus said. “Where were you?”

“Oh, well, you know I go to the other property sometimes,” he said vaguely.

Regulus’s eyes narrowed. “So you were out at the Black property?”

James should have known that Regulus would figure out that he’d broken their rules, he just didn’t realize that he would figure him out so quickly. Still, he was unable to lie to him. He just couldn’t do it.

“No,” he said. “I went —” He cleared his throat. “I went to Godric’s Hollow.”

Regulus froze, his teeth clenched tightly together. “Godric’s Hollow?”

“I know I wasn’t supposed to go out anywhere, but I wanted to see the old cottage. I needed to see where it happened, where Harry almost died.”

Regulus didn’t look happy, in fact, he looked very, very angry. “You just went to the cottage?”

James wanted to look away, but he felt like a deer in headlights. Apt for him, but very annoying.

“James,” Regulus said. James didn’t think he’d heard his name said so many times in quick succession in years.

“No, I went to the cemetery.”

“The cemetery?”

James just nodded as realization dropped over Regulus. “You went to see Lily.”

James took a deep breath. “I did.”

“On Valentine’s Day.”

“Right,” James said, realizing only a second too late how that sounded. “Wait.”

“No, it’s fine,” Regulus said quickly, his face a solid mask. James wasn’t going to see a single emotion through it.

“No, it’s not that —”

“It’s really okay,” Regulus said, his voice oddly bland, as if all the emotion had been leached out of it. “I should have realized. I’m not upset.”

James felt a flash of annoyance causing his next words to come out harsher than he intended. “Will you just let me explain?”

Regulus snapped his mouth closed. James instantly regretted it, he never wanted to yell at Regulus ever again, not since the last time, but surprisingly Regulus didn’t look hurt or frustrated. James wasn’t sure how he looked actually, his eyes were wide and his cheeks were bright red, but he didn’t understand why. He rushed to get his next words out.

“I didn’t go there because — It wasn’t,” he flapped his hands around helplessly, “romantic or anything. Lily and I weren’t —”

“She’s your wife, it’s okay if it was romantic,” Regulus said quietly.

“We were going to get divorced,” he said, the words dropping out of his mouth like a bomb. Regulus gasped, looking oddly embarrassed immediately like he hadn’t expected the noise to escape him.

“What?”

“She was going to leave me if we survived,” he said quickly. “So it wasn’t like that, I didn’t visit her because she’s my wife. I just needed closure and... she was my friend, okay? She was still my friend even if we shouldn’t have gotten married.”

Regulus watched him silently for a long time, his face unreadable. James couldn’t remember if they’d talked about this before, he couldn’t recall if Regulus knew that Lily was going to leave, and he just wanted Regulus to understand. He just wanted Regulus to see the place he still held for him.

“Please say something,” James said finally, unable to bear the silence any longer.

Regulus seemed to shake himself, a dozen emotions flashing across his face before settling onto one that looked like acceptance.

“Come on,” he said, gesturing for James to follow him.

“Huh?” James said dazedly.

“I have a gift for you,” Regulus said, promptly leaving the kitchen, clearly expecting James to follow. James hurried around the table and followed him out the front door. He only noticed he was still in his pajamas when they stepped outside.

“I should change,” James said. Regulus glanced at him, pursing his lips for a second, before transfiguring his pajamas and slippers into regular clothes. Then without warning, Regulus grabbed tightly onto James’s hand and apparated.

They landed on a random street in London and James immediately felt a glamour settle over his skin, Regulus's magic thick in the air. Regulus stuck out his wand and a moment later, the Knight Bus appeared around a corner. James hadn't taken the Knight Bus since he was sixteen, when he, Sirius, Remus, and Peter snuck out of the castle to go into muggle Edinburgh for a night. That had been a mistake, they'd all drunk far too much muggle liquor and ended up getting sick all over the sidewalk.

"Back again?" a man said as Regulus led them onto the bus.

"We're going to Hogsmeade," Regulus said stiffly. James followed him over toward one of the seats near the window, avoiding eye contact with anyone else inside. They sat close together, but not quite touching. Like always, James had no idea where they stood with each other. He didn't know how Regulus felt about him, about anything. He tried to just be happy he was here and tried not to let his thoughts get away from him.

When they arrived in Hogsmeade, Regulus quickly paid their bus fare. James wasn't sure where they were going, but when instead of heading deeper into Hogsmeade, Regulus turned around and started heading toward Hogwarts, James felt his uncertainty grow.

"Are we going to the school?" James asked, the silence between them had lingered for so long that his voice sounded odd to his ears.

Regulus threw a smile over his shoulder. "Nope," he said. He didn't elaborate, not that James thought he would. When they started getting closer to the Hogwarts gates, Regulus took a sharp turn off the trail toward the Forbidden Forest. James felt more confused than ever. It wasn't until they were deep within the trees that he finally decided to say something.

"You didn't bring me out here to kill me, did you?" James asked with an awkward chuckle. Regulus stopped to look at him, his face oddly soft, though there was mirth in his eyes.

"No, we're just out here to get some exercise," Regulus said.

"Exercise?"

"I didn't know that you'd been galavanting all over England —"

"I wasn't —"

"I figured you might enjoy a trip out of the house for your birthday."

James gave him a suspicious look. "Right," he said slowly, "I just didn't expect the Forbidden Forest to be on that list of places."

Regulus laughed. "Come on." He abruptly began jogging away. James had never felt so lost, but he still followed him because it was Regulus and James was helpless against him. Right as he started jogging behind him, Regulus took two broad sprints then jumped in the air and transformed into his animagus form.

James had all but forgotten about it, there had been much going on in his life that he hadn't thought about Regulus turning into an animal, but now with a huge black bear before him, all

he could do was shout in delight. Regulus shook his head around, making a loud barking noise, and watched James with knowing eyes.

James laughed loudly and then transformed as well. The two of them took off into the forest, just two animals, unlikely friends, playing together.

He couldn't say how long they were out there for, but he could easily say that it was the most fun he'd had since coming back to life. Maybe the most fun he'd had since years before he died. Running free out in the forest with Regulus in bear form was something he never would have imagined, but it was wildly entertaining.

Bears, it turned out, were excellent climbers. While they ran around together for a while, periodically Regulus would start dragging his huge bear body up a tree. It was so funny that James was sure he'd be gasping for breath if he was in human form. Regulus's big fluffy butt was so adorable he could barely handle it.

At one point he started chasing Regulus a bit, but then Regulus started chasing him back and James learned that having a fully grown black bear following you through the forest was genuinely terrifying. He was faster than Regulus, but not by much, and Regulus was clever, sneaking around trees to jump out at him.

Regulus did get lucky one time and gently tackled James to the floor, but he was quick to let him go, letting out a loud bear huff.

As they made their way back to London, exhausted from their time in the forest, James couldn't help thinking that he'd be reliving this birthday for years inside his memories. Once they were inside Grimmauld, Regulus sent him off to shower — his clothes had turned back into pajamas at some point during the day. James was just relieved that Regulus was still there when he came back downstairs, dinner spread out on the table.

"Where is this from?" James asked, breathing in deeply to smell all the rich foods.

"I made it," Regulus said.

"You made it? I didn't know you could cook," James said playfully.

"Yes," Regulus said, rolling his eyes. "Try to control your surprise."

They ate together in the dim light, candles lit around the room illuminating it. If James didn't know any better, he would have thought this was a date. It was only when the night was coming to an end that he remembered that something was bothering him.

Regulus was getting up to head back to the castle, sure that someone would be looking for him by now, when James stopped him. He almost regretted having to say the words.

"What is it?" Regulus asked.

James sighed. "Harry's been writing me." Confusion, quickly followed by understanding, crossed Regulus's face.

“Oh,” he said quietly. He turned to leave the room, but James could tell from the way he was walking that he wasn’t going far. He followed through the house, both of them moving silently, as he headed right for the Black family tapestry, the one full of names and dates. Both of their eyes went right to Sirius’s name, there was no death year under his name.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” James asked softly, unable to keep the hurt out of his tone.

Regulus sighed quietly, taking a moment before answering. “Harry thinks I’m still a Death Eater.”

James sort of knew that. Well, he knew that Harry was hurt by Regulus’s secret-keeping, and he knew that he wasn’t thinking straight with everything related to Draco. He didn’t think it was fair that Harry would be suspicious of Regulus, but he couldn’t blame him too much considering he’d been the same way at that age.

“Do you agree with him?” Regulus asked.

James jolted in surprise. “What?” he breathed. Regulus didn’t look at him, but his face hardened.

“Do you think I’m still helping the — You-Know-Who?”

“No, of course I don’t think that,” James said. “I’ll admit that I’m a little disappointed that you’ve been keeping secrets from me, but I don’t think you’re working for Voldemort.”

Regulus blew out a long breath, tucking his chin down against his chest like the weight of the world was bearing down on him. James wanted to hold him so badly.

“You nearly died again,” James said.

Regulus nodded. “It was Draco’s fault,” Regulus said, “but I don’t think he meant it. It wasn’t aimed at me.”

“Who was he trying to poison?”

“Dumbledore.”

“Dumbledore?” James said far too loudly.

“It’s complicated, and now Draco won’t talk to me. Harry won’t either, mind you, but Draco keeps turning to run away from me every time we make eye contact like I’m going to punish him and it makes me sick to my stomach. Harry’s allowed to be upset, I don’t fault him for that, but I can’t be mad at Draco. I just can’t do it. Not with everything I’ve done in my past.”

“I know,” James said, finally giving into the desire to touch Regulus. He moved forward and wrapped his arms around Regulus’s waist, pleased that Regulus leaned against him instantly, taking solace in his presence. He didn’t cry, and he didn’t speak for a long time, but James could feel his body relaxing the longer he was held.

“I would know, wouldn’t I?” Regulus whispered, his voice so miserable that James felt his chest tighten.

“What?”

“I would know if Sirius was dead.”

James looked at Sirius’s name on the family tree again. “Of course, you would know,” he lied, squeezing Regulus a little tighter like he might vanish if he didn’t hold on. “He’s going to come back.”

Regulus nodded against his shoulder, but he didn’t reply. James didn’t know what else was left to say, so he didn’t speak either.

Chapter End Notes

btw i made an instagram if you guys are interested in following it. find me at [maladaptivewriting](#)

the whispers.

Chapter Notes

okay, if you haven't been keeping up with [breiða sjáflr](#) because you wanted to wait for it to be finished (coward) then this is your chance to go back and read it. it is required reading for this fic, you will be confused if you don't read it.

He's betraying you .

The whispered words echoed in his head like rain on the ocean, a hiss of water on water, splashing over and over. He couldn't pinpoint when they'd started, but every time Regulus brushed off his concerns they got louder.

The dreams started after Regulus was poisoned, nearly killed, by Malfoy. He hadn't thought much of who Regulus had been before. He knew that he'd been a Death Eater, but that hadn't meant much to him before. Now it was like he couldn't escape it. There was a time when he couldn't understand how James could have hurt Regulus the way he did, but now he thought he understood.

He's betraying you .

He kept dreaming of him placing one of those silver Death Eater masks over his face, his eyes dark with hatred and violence, and he would wake up sweating in a panic. He hadn't been able to speak to Regulus in weeks. He could tell that Regulus was following him, trying to trap him so they could speak, but every time Regulus got close, he would use the map and the invisibility cloak to escape him.

Once he even used his animagus form to run away, transforming into a crow before hopping out of the Gryffindor Tower window, taking flight in a terrifying and death-defying display. If anyone had seen him, and if Regulus had caught him, he was sure he would have been yelled at.

As it was, it was now time for their Easter holiday break, and he and Regulus still hadn't spoken.

He's betraying you .

He'd almost refused to return to Grimmauld just to stay away from Regulus, to keep the unsteady suspicion at bay, but it sounded like James wanted him to return.

James had been less than helpful in his letters, obviously trying to talk him out of his suspicions without saying anything outright. He believed that he would have more success in

person if James couldn't pause to think about what he was writing. Not to mention that he desperately wanted to know if there had been any updates on Sirius and Remus.

He'd been trying not to think about the fact that they were unreachable — he'd snuck away to the owlery one night and sent Hedwig off with a letter for them, but she'd returned with the letter still tied around her ankle — but it was becoming difficult. He couldn't ask Regulus about it, not only because he wasn't speaking to him, but also because he was sure that Regulus would just lie, as he had been for weeks, maybe months.

He's betraying you .

He spotted Malfoy in the Great Hall that morning before most of the student body headed out to the Hogwarts Express. He was dressed in a stiff black suit, one that seemed comically out of place among his peers, most of them dressed in leisure clothes or even pajamas. Malfoy's face was so pale that he could make out the veins beneath his skin.

It was hard to drag his eyes away from Malfoy. He could hear Ron next to him rattling on about something, but he wasn't listening, not that he ever did when he heard the name 'Lavender' leave his mouth. Ron didn't seem to need any input from him though. He was grateful for it because he kept noticing the way Malfoy's eyes would hit the light and it was unsettlingly distracting.

He knew he was only interested in watching him because he was a Death Eater, but it still made him feel weird. It was almost like nausea, seeing Malfoy's blonde hair reflecting the candlelight would make his stomach clench. He was sure that it was disgust he was feeling, it was just that he hadn't felt disgust like that before for anyone else.

Then again, Malfoy did always cause unique responses from him. Especially since Slughorn's Christmas party when he'd watched Malfoy grab Daphne Greengrass's waist, and he'd felt instantly dizzy.

He's betraying you .

Regulus wasn't at breakfast, but he kept expecting him to waltz in and head right to Malfoy. The two hadn't spoken in public since that time in the Hospital Wing, but he couldn't be sure that they weren't speaking to each other in private. Scheming together, he corrected.

He worried about them meeting up on the train, but Malfoy didn't board the Hogwarts Express like the rest of them. And Regulus went right to Lavender and Parvati's compartment, joined shortly by Luna and Ginny. He wondered what that group had to talk about it, but he'd never understood Regulus's friendship with Lavender and Parvati.

He's betraying you .

When they arrived at King's Cross hours later — he'd spent the entire ride with Ron and Hermione, they'd made up since their falling out the previous term, but there was still a stilted, heavy silence between them that made him a bit uncomfortable — he finally resigned himself to speaking to Regulus. He would need him to take him back to Grimmauld.

What if he takes you somewhere else? What if takes you to Voldemort?

He tried to shake the thoughts away, gritting his teeth against the knowledge that if Regulus did betray him that he would fight his way out. Still, the misgivings weighed heavily on his mind, growing itchier by the day, like a rash that wouldn't respond to treatment. Louder and louder, more insistent.

He yawned. He hadn't been sleeping well. He'd dreamt of Regulus killing Ron the night before and had woken up with a shout halfway out of his mouth. He'd taken to silencing his bed curtains, he didn't want anyone else to know how bad things had been.

He kept thinking about telling Hermione and Ron about his suspicions, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

They could be working for him .

He didn't trust anyone anymore.

He found Regulus on the train platform once most of the other students were gone, his trunk already shrunk and in his pocket. Regulus gave him a polite nod, just a small smile on his lips, one that put him more on edge, before he reached out and grabbed his arm, apparating them away. Regulus had become less careful about apparating in public, it was like he didn't care whether someone noticed them.

"Hey, you two are back early," James said the moment they walked through the front door. Regulus rolled his eyes. "Harry! It's good to see you."

Harry gave him a tight smile before leaving the room. He needed to talk to James, his father, but now wasn't the time, not when he was looking at Regulus like that.

It was like he was a puppy who'd just been shunned by its owner, every time he glanced at Regulus his eyes would glint all while the tension around his face would grow tight. Harry found it infuriating. Didn't he understand? Didn't he see that Regulus wasn't who he said he was going to be?

He's betraying you .

Harry slammed the door to his bedroom, Sirius's old bedroom, he reminded himself, then threw himself onto the bed. He would head back down for dinner in a few hours, but for now, he just wanted to be alone. He had enough on his mind as it was, he didn't need to make it worse.

Without meaning to, he slowly drifted off the sleep. He'd been so tired, it felt like he hadn't slept in weeks. He didn't dream of Regulus this time, instead, he dreamt of Sirius, he imagined him returning home, but not as himself, instead of a walking, soulless corpse as if he'd been kissed by a dementor. He woke with a gasp, the room around him still and dark.

He checked the time. It was just after three in the morning. He opened the door to his room to find a plate of food with a stasis charm on it. He scarfed the food down while still standing in

the doorway, something like rage flowing through his veins. Rage he couldn't place, rage that felt like it didn't belong to him.

He's betraying you .

He went back to sleep without another thought and dreamt of his death, this time in his nursery, killed by Voldemort with just the flick of his wand.

The Easter holidays started off slow and empty. He'd spoken to James once or twice during those first few days, but Regulus was never far enough away for Harry to feel comfortable enough to bring up his suspicions. Harry wished that Regulus would leave the house, if only for a few hours, so that he and James could be alone, but he never did.

He didn't know what he was spending his time doing otherwise, not until Tuesday night. It was after dinner, something the three of them ate together in silence around the table in the kitchen. After the plates were floating into the kitchen sink, Harry noticed Regulus head up the stairs, a dazed look on his face like he was sleepwalking.

"Want to play a game of chess?" James asked with a smile, a little tug of worry at his lips as he eyed Regulus's retreating back.

"Yeah, why not?" Harry said blandly. The two of them played three games, barely a word spoken between them. Harry won all three and he was starting to feel as if James was letting him win. It made him unreasonably angry so when the round was done, he said a stiff good night and left the room before he could think about the way James's face dropped.

Only ten minutes after Harry shut himself up in his room, he heard the sound of James's footsteps climbing the stairs, heading to the parlor. Harry waited until the footsteps stopped to creep out of his room, throwing his invisibility cloak over himself for good measure.

"Are you drunk?" he heard James say as he got closer to the slightly open door. He couldn't tell if he sounded angry or not, there was a carefulness to his words like he was trying not to upset Regulus.

"No," Regulus said with a very quiet chuckle. "Want one?"

James didn't answer out loud, but he must have nodded because Harry then heard the sounds of Regulus grabbing a glass and pouring liquid into it. It was quiet for a long few minutes and Harry was just starting to consider going back to his room when James spoke again.

"Does it update on its own?" James whispered. Harry furrowed his eyebrows in confusion.

"It does sometimes," Regulus answered. "But not all the time. When my Uncle Alphard died, it updated that day, his death year appearing just a few hours after noon, but it's not always like that. My mother used to say that there were some deaths that couldn't be recorded automatically, that they would have to be added, but she never clarified which ones."

James made a thoughtful humming sound. “What happened when you died? Did your year appear?” Pain was so obvious in his voice that it made Harry feel like he was going to collapse.

“I don’t know,” Regulus said. “I suppose I could have asked Kreacher to tell me, but I never thought about it, not until recently. Clearly, there is no date there now, but I’m not sure if it vanished when I came back or not.”

“I think —” he cut off with a huff.

“What?” Regulus asked.

“Nothing,” James said quickly.

Harry could hear the exasperation in Regulus’s voice when he replied, “Just say it.”

“I don’t think it’s good for you to spend every night in here. It feels like you’re torturing yourself by watching Sirius’s name.”

“What else would you rather I be doing?” There was a bite to his words.

James sighed. “You don’t have to do anything; I just don’t like seeing you like this.”

Regulus didn’t reply and James didn’t add anything else. After another ten minutes, Harry heard someone moving around and a second later, Regulus left the room, walking right past where Harry was hidden under his cloak and heading toward his bedroom. James didn’t leave the room for another half an hour. Harry wondered if he was waiting for Regulus to come back. He never did.

James eventually gave up and went to bed as well, and Harry entered the room to see what they were talking about. His eyes were drawn immediately to the Black family tree that spread across the wall like Devil’s Snare.

Right, he thought, he should have realized. He glanced at Sirius’s name on the tapestry, the burns that had once been there, now removed. He didn’t know when that happened. Had Regulus removed the burns? Had Kreacher? Had James?

He couldn’t be sure.

Two more days passed with nothing to show for them. James asked him a few times to play chess — or any other game Harry might be interested in playing — but Harry turned him down each time. Regulus was still floating around the house like a ghost.

He would have to just accept that Regulus would be nearby if he wanted to talk to James before he headed back to Hogwarts, he realized. He was running out of options. It wasn’t like he could get James to sneak him out of the house, just the two of them, Regulus would never allow that to happen.

He knew it was bad though because by Thursday evening he'd grown desperate enough to start working on classwork that wasn't due for another week. He was in the living room, his books spread around him, when he heard a strange noise. He had just lifted his head, glancing around the room curiously, when Regulus came barreling down the stairs.

He poked his head into the living room, his face drawn with some mixture of panic and hope, but when he saw that nothing was amiss, his head snapped toward the front door. Harry was on his feet before he could second guess himself, both of them heading toward the door just as it began to open.

James was standing in the doorway of the library in an instant, all of their eyes glued to the opening door, unblinking so they didn't miss the moment Sirius came strolling into the entryway, Remus close behind him.

Harry heard someone gasp, but he couldn't be sure if it was James, Regulus, or even himself. Perhaps it was a mix of all three.

Sirius paused for only a second when he spotted them, a wide grin stretching across his lips in an instant.

"Hey," he greeted easily.

There was a looseness to his shoulders that Harry was sure he'd never seen before, as if he'd been freed from something he'd been wearing for a long time. That looseness didn't stay forever though because Regulus stalked forward after only a beat of silence and shoved Sirius so roughly that he slammed into the wall behind him with a loud *oof*.

"What was that for?" he shouted. Remus looked shocked; his hands outstretched like he was going to intervene but had stopped himself at the last second.

"Where have you been?" Regulus said sharply, his voice shrill. "I haven't heard from you in weeks. I thought you were dead. You couldn't have bothered to call me on the mirror? You were unreachable. Not even the owls could reach you!"

The expression of outrage dropped as he took in Regulus's words. A taunting look replaced it, something mirthful.

"Aww, did you miss me?" Sirius jeered.

Regulus snarled, actually snarled. "No, you bloody dickhead."

"It's okay, Reggie. I missed you too." Sirius opened his arms like he was going to pull Regulus into a hug. Regulus slapped one of his hands away, but Sirius kept moving forward. Regulus took two slow steps backward, but when Sirius kept moving, he turned and ran, Sirius sprinting after him.

"Stop following me!" Regulus shouted.

Sirius just laughed, the noise making the lights in Grimmauld brighten instantly, as if the house could feel something breaking free. Harry sucked in a breath, the suspicion that had

been plaguing him, that untethered rage, the one that he couldn't place, shattered into a million pieces. He felt lightheaded suddenly, his knees weakening beneath him.

"Harry?" he heard Remus ask softly. Harry squeezed his eyes shut, leaning heavily against the wall and sliding down the floor, the room was spinning, and he felt like he was suffocating.

"Harry, breathe. You have to breathe." There was a hand on his back, but it was only James's voice that was cutting through the panic. "Harry, can you hear me?"

Harry tried to nod, but he wasn't sure that he succeeded. He couldn't understand what was happening to him, but as the feelings inside him broke apart, the whispers started to grow louder.

He's going to kill you. He's going to kill Sirius. He's going to kill Remus. He's going to kill James.

The words repeated so loudly that he couldn't hear anything else. Suddenly, something cold and wet touched the back of his neck and he was shoved back into his body, pain splintering across his skin, just bad enough to bring awareness back to his mind.

He sucked in a breath, the first full one since Sirius had returned, and he heard James's voice next to him. "That's it. Just breathe. It's okay. You're safe."

It took him another few long breaths to open his eyes, but when he did, it was to discover Remus and James crouched over him, both of their faces concerned and anxious.

"There he is," James said softly, a small flash of relief crossing his features.

"Sorry," he croaked.

"Nothing to apologize for," Remus said, the low rumble of his voice like a soft blanket being thrown over his shoulders. "Do you want to talk about what just happened?"

Harry looked away, shame trickling down his spine. He was so confused. He didn't understand why Regulus was so worried about Sirius, why he was so obviously pleased to see him home again, not when he was betraying them, not when he was working for Voldemort.

He's betraying you .

Those words felt like being stabbed by a needle, he inhaled sharply and felt James's hand, still on his back, start to move in small, comforting circles. There was a wet flannel on the back of his neck, the water starting to drip down his skin under his shirt, but he didn't care. The cold was almost refreshing.

"Sorry," he repeated.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Remus and James sharing a look, but he didn't know what it meant.

He went to bed without speaking to anyone else that night, rushing off the moment James and Remus let him go. He could tell that they wanted him to stay, that they wanted to talk about it, but he couldn't let the words out, he couldn't explain what was going on in his head, not when he didn't understand it himself.

He woke the next morning feeling like he'd just played three Quidditch games back-to-back, his muscles sore and achy. He stumbled down to find Remus cooking breakfast, humming quietly under his breath. He glanced over at Harry when he walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning," Remus greeted softly. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Harry said stiffly. Eventually, Sirius, James, and Regulus all joined them for breakfast as well, just as Remus was plating the food he'd cooked. Harry was about to dig into his food when Sirius cleared his throat.

"I have something to share," he said, giving Remus a look that Harry didn't understand. There was something soft there, something that made Harry feel like he was intruding. He felt almost embarrassed looking at it.

"Sirius," Regulus said warningly.

He's betraying you .

"Not about that," Remus said quickly. He shared that soft look Sirius was wearing, his usually tired face seemed unusually relaxed.

"What do you have to share?" James asked. He was sitting on the edge of his seat, leaning so far forward that his elbows were on either side of his plate of food.

Sirius and Remus stared at each other in silence for another few seconds before Sirius finally spoke, his words floating somewhere far above them, dancing around like they were invented for celebration.

"Remus and I are getting married," Sirius said. James jumped to his feet so quickly that his chair fell to the floor behind him.

"Yes!" he shouted, rushing over and practically tackling Sirius with a hug, the two of them tumbling to the floor in a mess of limbs and laughter. Remus shook his head fondly. Harry felt something loosen in his chest, something he didn't have words for, but when he looked over at Regulus, at the way his face had gone blank, his chest grew tight all over again.

He's betraying you .

"Congratulations," Regulus said, his words only slightly stiff. Remus's eyebrows twitched but they didn't ruin the pleased look on his face.

"Thank you, Regulus," Remus said. "I'm —" he paused to look at where James and Sirius were now whispering to each other, still tangled on the floor, "I'm sorry we were out of reach for so long."

“It’s okay,” Regulus said, though it clearly wasn’t. His back had straightened to the point where he looked like he had a board strapped to the back of his clothes.

“You must know it wasn’t on purpose,” Remus said quickly.

Regulus nodded once. “If you’ll excuse me.” He was out of his seat before anyone could reply, his food abandoned.

He’s betraying you .

Harry congratulated Sirius and Remus before eating his breakfast that morning, but he didn’t know what else to say. He’d never met any adults who were planning to get married. In all honesty, he didn’t even know Sirius and Remus were... like that. He tried to shake off the weird judgment he could sense from his childhood with the Dursleys, the thoughts that made him feel embarrassed and ashamed. He wanted to be happy for them, especially given how delighted Sirius looked, but mostly he just felt lost.

He locked himself in his room after eating and spent the day halfheartedly working on his schoolwork. It wasn’t until late afternoon, only an hour or two before dinner was usually served, that Harry was interrupted by a soft knock on the door. He stood to unlock the door, opening it just a fraction to see Sirius standing there looking unsure.

“Can I come in?” Sirius asked.

“Yeah, yes, of course,” Harry said quickly, opening the door the rest of the way to let Sirius step inside. He was relieved when Sirius shut the door behind him.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Sirius said.

“About what?” Harry asked, shoving his papers aside so that Sirius could sit next to him on the bed. Harry felt unusually nervous. What if Sirius brought up the things Harry had been saying in his letters to James? What if he’d come to confront him? Or worse, what if he had suspicions of his own and he was just coming to confirm them, to tell Harry that he was right not to trust Regulus?

Instead, he said, “It’s about my wedding.”

Harry’s eyebrows jumped halfway up his forehead.

“Oh,” he said, “what about it?”

Sirius smiled, a shy thing that confused Harry. He’d never seen Sirius look shy before.

“I’m not sure how much you know about Remus and I,” Sirius began.

“I don’t know anything,” Harry interrupted to say.

“Well, we used to — we were together, during the first war. I never thought — I didn’t know that we would find our way back to each other, but I’m happy we did. I only say this because

— well, I know this must be confusing for you.”

“I just didn’t know that you two…”

“Yes, well, I guess we were more subtle about it than I thought.” Sirius shook his head, his eyes far away like he was remembering something that Harry would never understand. “But that’s not the only reason I came in here to talk to you.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly. His body was tense. Sirius’s foot was kicking repeatedly, moving like a dog nervously wagging its tail.

“I wanted to ask — I wanted to know if you’d be my best man.”

Harry jolted. “In your wedding?”

Sirius grinned, chuckling quietly. “That’s the idea.”

“But —” Harry floundered, at a loss for words. “What about James?”

“Remus is planning to ask James,” Sirius said, his smile growing even wider.

He’s betraying you . He’s betraying you . He’s betraying you .

“What about Regulus?” Harry whispered, his voice low like Regulus might be right outside.

“There’s something else I need him to do,” Sirius said vaguely.

Harry chewed on his bottom lip for a moment before asking, “Will you tell me what ritual you and Remus were looking for?”

Sirius seemed surprised by his words. “Oh, that.” He cleared his throat twice. “Yeah, of course, we’ll tell you about it.”

“Right now?” Harry asked.

Sirius frowned. “No, not right now,” Sirius said. “Regulus said that we should wait till after you finish out the year.”

“Regulus said that?”

Sirius’s face did something very odd. “Yeah? Why?”

“No reason,” Harry grumbled.

He’s betraying you .

A line appeared between Sirius’s eyebrows. “Harry —”

“I’ll have to think about it,” Harry said.

“What?” Sirius asked faintly.

“Being your best man, I’ll have to think about it.”

“Oh,” Sirius said, hurt so obvious in his voice that Harry almost took it back. “Right, that makes sense. Of course. Take all the time you need.”

Harry didn’t look up to watch him leave, but once he was alone, he felt that rage start dripping into his skin again, something uncontrollable forming inside him.

He’s betraying you .

He’s betraying you .

He’s betraying you .

He’s betraying you .

He’s betraying you .

the plan.

“Okay, what's wrong?” Sirius said, barging into Regulus’s room like he owned the place. Regulus supposed that he did, being head of the family and everything, but still, he could have had a little respect for the place.

“You’ll have to be more specific than that,” Regulus said stiffly, turning away from the door. He was sitting at his desk, a rare occurrence these days, but he wasn’t getting much of anything done. He’d spent no less than four hours ruminating on all the problems he couldn’t fix in his life. It wasn’t productive, but he couldn’t seem to shake himself out of it.

“Well,” Sirius said, his voice dropping like he hadn’t been expecting Regulus’s reaction, “you reacted... unexpectedly to my announcement, and you’ve been avoiding me since I got home beyond the one conversation we had that lasted all of five minutes. Not to mention that when I went to ask Harry to be my best man, he told me he *had to think about it* and then wouldn’t look me in the eye.”

Regulus felt like he wasn’t getting deep enough breaths. It was like the bottom of his lungs had been filled with still, black water, taking up all the space he might have used to steady himself before this conversation, before any conversation really. How was he expected to continue doing all of this? How could he keep going when every time something got better, something else seemed to get worse? He was letting everyone down, he was sure. Anyone else would have been better equipped to deal with these problems. Sometimes he wished that he had never been brought back, he wished that he’d stayed dead at the bottom of the cave, water filling all the space in his lungs, living there, consuming him—

“Reggie,” Sirius snapped, jolting Regulus out of his thoughts. “Are you even listening to me?”

“What do you want me to say?” Regulus responded unthinkingly. Sirius made an odd sound, and when he next spoke, his voice was oddly gentle.

“Just tell me the truth. Can you explain what’s going on?”

Regulus wanted to bristle at the tone, but he found it oddly soothing. “I’m happy for you and Remus,” he said.

“Are you?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You tell me.”

He wanted to tell him that he was actually happy for them, that he didn’t have a single reason not to be, but as he paused and searched his feelings, he found that that wasn’t true. He didn’t like it, but he didn’t feel that it was very kind to not feel happy for his brother. He sighed, feeling lower than he’d ever felt.

“I felt less alone,” Regulus mumbled under his breath.

“What was that?”

“I felt less alone,” he repeated, only a bit louder. He didn’t know how to explain it, and he didn’t want to if he was honest. Sirius was quiet for a moment.

“I see,” he said.

“Do you?” Regulus asked.

“It’s less daunting to be alone if someone else is alone with you,” Sirius said. “I can appreciate that.”

“I don’t want you to be unhappy,” Regulus said quickly. “I’ve never wanted that.”

“I know that,” Sirius said, then under his breath added, “at least, I was pretty sure I knew that.”

“I—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did.” He felt stupid, having his brother spot his feelings so quickly when he himself had been unwilling to examine them was difficult to bear. He felt foolish.

“I forgive you,” Sirius said. There was a beat of silence, and Regulus was trying to remember what other problems Sirius had brought up. Everything felt so far away. “You’re not alone though, you know that, right?”

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked after a moment, finally turning in his chair to look at Sirius who was still standing by the door.

“Well, I mean, you have—” he waved his hands around, looking helpless for a moment.

“I have what?” Regulus replied, thoroughly confused.

Sirius’s shoulders dropped. “Never mind. What’s going on with Harry?”

“Oh.” Regulus turned back around.

He didn’t know how to face this, he couldn’t do it, and he didn’t want to look at Sirius as he failed. He wished that Sirius would just give up, would leave him to his thoughts. He knew that was unlikely, so he sucked in a long breath, struggling to feel it in his lungs once again.

“It’s the Horcrux. It’s affecting him more and more. Sometimes I’m sure I can hear it changing him. I didn’t tell him about you and Remus going to find the ritual and when McGonagall tried to send an owl to you, it came back with the letter still attached. Harry overheard her talking about it, so he figured out that I’d been hiding all of that from him. That plus the fact that I’ve been trying to protect Draco, who nearly killed me accidentally, has made Harry very suspicious of me.”

He cut himself off finally, pushing the rest of the words that wanted to spill out of him down. He felt like he was losing control.

“Why did you lie to him?” Sirius asked, tossing the words out like they were nothing. Regulus flinched. He hoped Sirius couldn’t see it happen.

“I didn’t want him to worry, and I already told you that I didn’t want to ruin his sixth year by telling him about the Horcrux, especially if I didn’t have a solution yet.”

“And Draco?” Sirius didn’t sound judgment when he asked it, but there was something else in his tone that Regulus didn’t appreciate.

“He’s just a kid. I won’t apologize for trying to help him,” Regulus said, stiff and unmovable.

“I think you could have just told Harry. Maybe he wouldn’t be reacting this strongly if you’d told him from the beginning.”

It felt like being stabbed as if Sirius had taken a quill and jammed it between his shoulder blades. He stood up from the desk, finally turning fully toward his brother.

“How else would you like me to handle this situation? Tell me what I’m doing wrong, and I’ll fix it. Just tell me what to do!”

Sirius looked surprised by the outburst, but Regulus, who’d felt the overflow coming for days, weeks, months, realized that it was all inevitable. It was like every decision he made was the wrong one, as if every choice led him further down the path into something uncontrollable, into failure, into destruction. He tried to make the best decisions that he could, but looking back, all of them felt wrong.

It didn’t help that every criticism of his choices came in the form of *just* statements, even from his own inner critic. *Just* tell Harry, *just* talk to Dumbledore, *just* kidnap Draco. *Just, just, just*. As if it was that simple, as if any choice he made that was different than his current one wouldn’t also be wrong, wouldn’t also cause mayhem.

“Well?” he snapped when Sirius didn’t speak. “It’s clear you’re not impressed with how things have been handled. So please, just tell me how I can fix it.”

“Regulus,” Sirius said slowly. His eyes were flickering around Regulus’s face, searching him, inspecting him. “I don’t think you’re doing a bad job.”

“Don’t lie!”

Sirius threw his hands out. “I’m not lying! I know you’re doing the best you can. In hindsight maybe talking to Harry would have been better, but I’m not criticizing you.”

Regulus growled in frustration, digging his nails into the palms of his hands. “Then how do I fix it?”

Sirius looked caught off guard, he looked confused. It frustrated Regulus to no end. He was supposed to have the answers. Someone else had to have the answers.

“I’ve thought about pulling him out of school. I’m worried about what he’ll do and the potential danger that comes from being at Hogwarts. But he won’t even look at me, and I’m afraid if I try to corner him into talking to me, or Merlin forbid, trap him in this house, that the fear and paranoia he’s experiencing is going to get so much worse.

“I agree, I should have told him from the beginning, but it’s too late now, and he no longer trusts me. If anyone in this house spends too much time listening to me, then Harry isn’t going to trust them either. I’ve been trying to avoid James when I can, I’m hoping that at the very least Harry will talk to him, but I don’t think I’m succeeding.

“Not to mention, that if I do pull him out of Hogwarts, and he starts to feel trapped here, then he might try and run away. And then what? Every Death Eater in England will be trying to find him, and we can’t protect him if he gets away from us.”

While Regulus ranted, Sirius seemed to be struggling to keep up, but finally, it all seemed to click into place for him. His eyebrows furrowed just slightly, the way they always did when he was deep in thought. His hands kept twitching like he was trying to keep himself from reaching out.

“So, he has to go back to Hogwarts, at least for the rest of the year,” Sirius said in agreement. “And I think you’re right about him not trusting you.” He cringed. “I’m not happy about it, but it makes sense. It wasn’t until I mentioned talking to you that he said he had to think about being my best man.”

Regulus sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Sirius waved him off. “It’s okay,” he said. “It’s just for now. Soon we’ll get the Horcrux out and then we’ll be able to explain it all to him.”

“Do you still think it’s a good idea to wait till after the term ends?” Regulus asked. He’d originally suggested waiting in case the ritual had any side effects or was difficult to recover from. It wouldn’t do for Harry to miss weeks of school this close to finals.

Sirius nodded. “I need time to practice. It wasn’t easy, and I don’t want to risk Harry’s life. I need to prepare.”

“Okay,” Regulus said, his shoulders dropping away from his ears as a small bit of stress was lifted off of him. “So then what do we do?”

Something lightened on Sirius’s face. “Let’s see if he can connect to James. Then he’ll at least have someone. We just need to know if he’s going to do something rash, and given who Harry is, that’s not a far-off possibility. If he’s talking to James, then maybe he’ll tell him before he does anything.”

Regulus nodded. “I think I need to leave.”

“Leave?” Sirius asked, sounding oddly distressed. “What are you talking about?”

“Not forever,” Regulus said, chuckling despite himself. “Just for a few hours, maybe a day at most. I think Harry is worried that I’m going to overhear him or something. I don’t know. But maybe he’ll be more willing to talk to James if I’m not here.”

“Where will you go?”

“Probably just to Diagon or something. I won’t go far.”

Sirius didn’t look happy about it, there was a tight frown on his lips like this was the worst possible outcome, but he begrudgingly agreed eventually. There was still so much Regulus didn’t know about their trip, the ritual, or what had kept them hidden for so long. He’d been too upset before to really hear about it, so when Sirius just told him the basics, Regulus had accepted it.

He had more questions now, but they didn’t have the time. For now, they had to focus on making Harry feel safe. They could worry about the ritual later.

They headed downstairs together after Regulus packed a small bag to bring with him. When they were almost to the kitchen, intent on searching out Remus and James to tell them the plan, they were interrupted by the sound of a sharp and angry voice coming from behind the kitchen door. The voice grew louder when James abruptly opened the door, flying through it and shutting it quickly behind him.

“Who is that?” Sirius asked sharply. James jumped slightly, clearly not expecting to see them standing there as if they were waiting for him. When the words that Sirius had spoken finally seemed to penetrate James’s brain, he winced like he was in pain.

“Tonks.”

“Tonks?” Sirius and Regulus asked at the same time. She’d been such an unknown presence in their life over the last few years, but now Sirius and Remus were engaged, so Regulus had assumed that Tonks and Remus would no longer be an issue.

“She’s actually a very nice person,” James said right as Tonks’s voice beyond the door took on an even angrier quality to it. “Usually, I mean. Not that she’s not being nice now. It’s important that people speak their mind.”

“What are you talking about?” Sirius asked incredulously. Regulus felt oddly like he might start laughing.

“I told Tonks about you and Remus,” James said, avoiding eye contact like a little kid who’d broken their mother’s favorite vase.

“That they’re getting married?” Regulus asked, almost positive that that wasn’t what James meant. In fact, Tonks and James’s weird friendship was starting to make a lot more sense to him.

“Well, no,” James said, drawing out the words like he didn’t actually want to tell them. “I told her that... I told her that Remus was in love with Sirius. Which he is!” he added quickly.

“I mean, obviously, you two are getting married, but she didn’t know that. She actually didn’t even know that the two of you used to... anyway, I told her because I felt bad ‘cause it seemed like Remus was leading her on a bit.”

Sirius’s jaw tightened more and more the longer James spoke and by the time he had to good graces to cut himself off, it was far too late. Sirius looked furious, though Regulus wasn’t sure if that fury was directed at James, Remus, or Tonks.

“So now Tonks is yelling at Remus,” Regulus said unhelpfully, once again having to suppress the laugh that was threatening to bubble up inside him.

“Right,” Sirius said heavily and started moving toward the kitchen. Almost as one, both James and Regulus shifted to hold him back. Regulus had no idea what Sirius planned to do, but he knew it wouldn’t be good if he let him enter that room before he had the chance to calm himself.

“Sirius, don’t you have something to tell James?” Regulus said forcefully, his voice a low hiss.

“Let me go,” Sirius hissed back, his eyes flashing dangerously. Regulus didn’t back down.

“No, there isn’t time for this. Talk to James.”

Sirius pulled on their grip one more time before giving in, his teeth grinding together harshly. “Fine. James, a word.” James looked nervously at Regulus, but Regulus just rolled his eyes at Sirius and his antics. He understood his lack of emotional stability, especially given his own outburst only an hour earlier, but that didn’t mean he had to enjoy it.

Sirius all but dragged James back up the stairs, leaving Regulus and the sounds of Tonks’s voice on the floor below. Regulus gave James one last small wave, offering a gentle smile that he hoped was reassuring, though based on the way James’s eyebrows furrowed, he didn’t think it had done the job.

Once they were gone, he quickly made his way to the floo and headed straight for Diagon Alley. He wasn’t lying when he said that that’s where he would head. He didn’t want to be far from home and despite the rising Death Eater presence, Diagon was still relatively safe. Besides, he had a few errands to run.

James had only given him a moment’s warning before Tonks entered the room, anger, betrayal, and hurt warring for control on her face. In retrospect, Remus should have seen this coming. He knew that he would have to talk to Tonks eventually, but he thought that he would have more time before that came to pass. He was still in that blissful glow of having dismantled the many walls between him and Sirius. He hadn’t yet considered what might await him at home.

The lecture he was receiving from Tonks — he wouldn’t go so far as to call it a conversation given how few words were leaving his mouth — felt like it was endless, and every word that came out of her mouth hurt worse than the last. Not that he had room to complain. It was

clear that he had hurt her deeply, and he didn't deny that he deserved her ire, but that didn't make it any easier to hear.

By the time she'd gotten to the end of what she wanted to say, Remus was sure he was only hearing about every third word. Not for lack of trying, but just because it was getting difficult to follow, to hear so many insults tossed his way.

"I deserved better than this," she said finally, lifting her chin a bit as if she was trying to hide her tears. They'd been threatening to spill over for several minutes by that point. "And you're a terrible friend."

With that said, she was gone, leaving the room in a rush of air so cold that Remus could have frozen inside it. That final statement felt worse than all the rest. It was true though, Remus couldn't deny that, he wouldn't have even tried. He was a terrible friend, had been since the beginning, and not even just to Tonks.

Years of regrets seemed to weigh down on him, an impossible heaviness that made him feel like he was going to sink into the floorboards. He pondered what James must think of him now. He'd gone out of his way to destabilize the relationship Remus had with Tonks, and though Remus didn't blame him for doing that, it did make him wonder if perhaps he had ruined his friendship with James beyond repair, as he had with Tonks.

At least, he assumed his friendship with Tonks was ruined beyond repair. He didn't see how they could get back to any semblance of friendliness after everything he'd done, but then again, he'd thought the same about Sirius and that hadn't turned out the way he'd expected. Somehow, he and Sirius had returned stronger than they had ever been, a foundation so firm that Remus doubted even death could shake it now held their bond. And James seemed happy about that, he seemed excited about their engagement, an engagement that Remus was still a bit confused by, though he wouldn't dream of objecting. But James was happy so maybe all wasn't lost.

If he was honest, the last two months had all been a bit of a blur. That small blip of a moment that they had together — when he'd cracked himself open so that Sirius could take a look inside, and they came back together in an explosion of light so bright it was nearly blinding — had felt like a fever dream once Sirius was gone again. He kept replaying the way Sirius's face lit up when he'd said that sarcastic dig about being Sirius's 'house husband,' the way Sirius had acted like that was a proposal.

Remus supposed it may as well have been given how irregular their relationship was.

He'd been devastated to find Sirius gone again, though he knew he would. He at least had the knowledge of what was happening to Sirius that time around, he knew he hadn't abandoned Remus on purpose, but that didn't make his absence any easier. Remus still suffered through the deprivation, and though he made more of an effort to take care of his physical body, he could feel his soul withering away as the days drifted by.

Sirius wasn't gone as long the second time, only a day or so past the three-week marker, but when he'd returned, he'd been so weak that after he collapsed in Remus's arms, he didn't wake again for four days. It was torture, and no matter what Remus did, he couldn't shake

him awake. Even his magic felt weak as if it was at risk of failing him at any given moment. He'd been so relieved when Sirius finally opened his eyes, it was like the first breath of clean air after a full moon, filling his lungs with life and sustenance.

Sirius had seemed more settled after the ritual. On that first day he hadn't wanted to talk about it, but Remus could see the way his shoulders were relaxed. It had been a long time since Remus had seen Sirius be anything other than extremely tense. It was a nice change, it made Remus feel a bit lighter as well. However, there was a small worry there, just enough to make Sirius chew his lips anxiously every now and again.

They apparated out of the forest, hoping that they would make it to Ryggeselva without splinching themselves. There was no way to tell how far the town was from where they were. Luckily they made it there with no injuries, Sirius still suspiciously quiet about the ritual.

In Ryggeselva, they discovered first that Ingrid and her mother had both suspiciously gone missing, the old woman who ran the inn told them that when they checked out, Ingrid also vanished. She said that she'd assumed Ingrid had gone to follow Sirius given her interest in him, but given that neither of them had seen her, and that her mother was missing as well, Remus guessed that she'd left town after failing to kill Remus in his sleep. He wondered if she thought she might face punishment for what she had done.

"I think we should talk to that Gaute guy before we leave," Sirius said after they'd left the inn that next morning. They weren't originally planning to stay the night, but they would need to rest in order to apparate again, and once they discovered that Ingrid was gone, they weren't as worried about their safety.

So in the morning, when the sun was just barely over the horizon, Sirius led them over to Grandfather Gaute's house. Remus wasn't looking forward to it at first, he hadn't enjoyed seeing the decapitated head of a werewolf the last time, but Sirius seemed set on speaking to the man. Remus had decided to just be grateful that Sirius's fingers were laced with his on their way there.

It turned out that Remus didn't have to see the werewolf again, they didn't have to go in at all. Once the house was in view, they noticed the young boy who had worked at the bookstore running around the front walkway, a normal, non-animal skin cloak flowing behind him. It took Remus a moment to understand what was different about the boy, but after a second it clicked. The boy they'd met in the bookstore, the one who had experienced some sort of weird approximation of possession in Grandfather Gaute's house, seemed very much like an adult. He still had some childlike mannerisms, but he seemed far too mature for his young age.

This child that was running around the yard wasn't like that at all. In fact, he looked like a child that they would see sprinting through the halls of Hogwarts. He was about the size of the first years, and he had the same childishness that they had, an air someone could only carry when nothing bad had ever happened to them.

As they were approaching the house, the front door opened, and Gaute exited. Before the door could close behind him, another person left the house. Remus paused for a second, wondering who he might see once Gaute moved out of the way, and was shocked to find that

he recognized her. It was the same woman who had given them dinner and a place to stay after traveling through the well, the woman who'd said she was looking for her daughter.

He was surprised to see her, he hadn't expected to see her ever again, but there was something oddly right about seeing the three of them together. It didn't take him long to discover that the boy was Gaute and the woman's grandchild. Their daughter, they later told them, had been lured away from their town and been trapped in the hellish community that lived in Østerdalsvaglen.

"It was run by that creature," the woman said to them. "I couldn't save her."

"It wasn't your fault," Sirius said. Remus raised his eyebrows, shocked by the confidence in Sirius's tone. He tilted his head and Sirius gave him a small smile before launching into an explanation of the ritual he'd endured, describing the old wizards that had been trapped in that cave for centuries, and the way his escaped sibling had to feed on other people's magic to maintain anything close to a normal existence.

"So, what happened to the sibling then? Now that he's gone," Remus asked.

"She's dead. She was only able to survive for so long because he was trapped. The ritual was never fully closed so it trapped them both. I doubt it was a nice existence, but that doesn't excuse the way she used those people."

"What happened to them?" Remus asked, uncertain if he even wanted to hear the answer.

Sirius frowned slightly, looking unsure, but the old woman was the one to answer. "They didn't survive," she said regretfully. "I'd always hoped that one day I could convince my daughter to leave, but when I saw what had become of her—" Tears filled her eyes as she spoke. Remus's throat felt tight with her grief. "She'd been gone for a long time."

They didn't stay long, accepting a small breakfast and some tea for leaving for the final time. They didn't find out what had happened to the boy, or what had changed in him, but Remus felt it was better that they didn't pry. It wasn't the kind of thing strangers deserved to know.

They apparated again, no longer worried about being followed since they were just heading back to London. They couldn't go straight there, it was too far, so they stopped in Oslo for a night, losing themselves in each other in a way that was altogether irresponsible given that Regulus was waiting to hear back from them and they were too distracted to remember to pick up the mirror.

He felt bad about it now, especially when he saw how stressed and angry Regulus had looked upon seeing them, but at the time he hadn't been thinking about Regulus. Or Harry. Or James. Or anyone that wasn't Sirius, warm above him and surrounding him. His fingers were too busy digging into Sirius's hips to think of reaching for the mirror. His eyes were glued to Sirius's like they were both worried that if they looked away, that they would miss something, that they would lose each other again. He'd been so tight that—

"Did Tonks leave?" Sirius's voice shook him out of his memories, probably a good thing given the direction they were headed.

“Oh, yeah,” Remus said, he’d sat down at the kitchen table in a daze after she’d left the room, but he didn’t remember doing it. Sirius was standing in the open doorway, leaning against the doorframe like he’d been there for a while, watching Remus get lost in his head. His face was unreadable and Remus felt his stomach drop a little bit. “Are you upset with me?”

Sirius’s eyebrow twitched, almost as if he was holding in a laugh, but Remus couldn’t be sure. “Do you remember me mentioning that the ritual separated my soul from my body?”

Remus tilted his head in confusion. “Yes,” he said. He thought about it a lot when he was alone in the forest, wondering if Sirius’s soul was somewhere near him, if it was lost.

“I thought it would just be... empty, I don’t know. I thought I wouldn’t actually go anywhere. Honestly, I thought it more metaphorical than anything.”

“But it wasn’t?” Remus asked, still a bit lost.

Sirius shook his head, a small smile on his lips. “I think it’s sort of like a meeting place, like a halfway point between them and us.”

“Them?”

“The people who have passed on.”

Realization seemed to dawn on Remus slowly. “Who did you see?” he breathed.

“Who do you think?” Sirius asked, his smile growing even further. He’d seen that smile before, he’d watched him smile like that at only one person. It was gentle, something soft and friendly.

“Lily,” Remus said, falling back in his chair as the name left his lips. Sirius’s eyes shone slightly.

“Lily,” he confirmed. “Do you know what she said to me?”

Remus shook his head. He didn’t know how to process this information, he didn’t know that he could have spoken even if he’d had something to say. Sirius had seen Lily. She’d always seemed like such a steady presence in their lives after she and Sirius became friends. Long before her relationship with James. Her loss had been felt in every facet of his life.

“I was... upset,” Sirius said, saying the words like he was admitting to some wrongdoing. “And she said—” he folded his lips in like he was holding in tears. “She said that not everything was about me.”

Remus laughed, loudly and instantly, the noise punching out of him. Sirius huffed a laugh as well, one tear finally falling down his cheek. Remus wanted so badly to go to him, but he couldn’t move yet.

“I know,” Sirius said. “She always got straight to the point.” He shook his head fondly. “I’m not sure that I agree completely. Some things are my fault, and my fault alone, and I’ll have

to live with them, but I—I think she was right about not *everything* being about me. The relationship you had with Tonks, and the words she had to speak to you, it wasn't about me."

Remus finally stood, pulled to Sirius as if moved by magic. Sirius tilted his head back so that their eyes stayed connected as Remus took a few steps toward him.

"I didn't like hearing her yell at you, but I understand why she did."

"I deserved it," Remus mumbled, reaching out to grab one of Sirius's hands, squeezing it slightly. Sirius squeezed back.

"I'm not upset with you," Sirius finally answered. "I'm sad for you, I know the two of you were friends, but I'm not upset. Selfishly, I'm just happy you're mine." His voice dropped into a whisper as the last sentence. Remus was helpless, defenseless against Sirius when he was this honest, when he whispered confessions like Remus was the most important person in his life.

He cupped Sirius's face with the palm of his hand, brushing his fingers through the hair growing along his upper lip and cheek. It was soft against his fingertips, gentle and welcomingly, just like Sirius when he made it passed the hard outer shell that had been built up over the years. Sirius's eyes were glowing as they stared up at him, bright and knowing.

Remus loved him. He loved him more than he'd ever loved anyone, more than he would ever love anyone. Sirius was as much a part of him as his own soul.

He leaned down slightly and pressed a soft kiss against his lips, deepening the kiss when Sirius's mouth opened on a gasp. He wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, kissing in the doorway like a pair of teenagers, but he wouldn't have traded it for anything.

the bathroom.

James,

You're not going to believe this.

Regulus's hand shook as he started quilling the letter to James. He'd crawled into bed late, well after three in the morning. Harry was already snoring softly beside him, disturbingly unbothered, and the other boys were resting as if the world hadn't just been turned upside down, as if everything was normal. He was dead tired too, he wanted to sleep more than he wanted to do nearly anything else, but James's letters had been the only thing keeping him going for several weeks now and he just had to write to him. It didn't matter how tired he was, James needed to be informed. He couldn't continue like this if he was the only one who knew.

Upon returning to Hogwarts, things were almost normal. Harry was still giving him the cold shoulder, but his suspicious glares had been tamped down a bit. Based on the brief and sneaky conversation Regulus had had with James the night before leaving for school, James had succeeded in getting Harry to trust him, at least a bit.

It felt wrong to sneak James into his room so late at night, but they had to be sure that Harry was asleep. Still, it made Regulus think of their time in Hogwarts together, when they'd just been two stupid teenagers, filled with uncontrollable hormones. He'd gotten the strongest desire to reach out and touch James the moment he'd snuck into his room. His fingers itched with the need. It took nearly all his focus to fight off the feelings.

That part of their relationship was long dead and buried. Regulus doubted it would ever be revived.

He wasn't upset by it, he wouldn't be, not when he was so grateful for the small sliver of James that he had. And besides, it turned out that having James as a friend and an ally was much more valuable than he would have thought. He had a steady presence that Regulus found invaluable. He was comforted by him.

So he let him tiptoe in to meet him in the dead of night so they could talk about Harry and his growing difficulties, and he didn't even complain about the silliness of it all.

"He opened up to me a bit," James whispered.

"Did you say you didn't trust me?" Regulus asked, immediately regretting it. If James did do that, even if just to get into Harry's good graces, then he wasn't allowed to be hurt by it. He'd told himself that a million times at that point. His stomach still sank at the thought.

James's face did something very odd, something Regulus didn't understand, but then he shook his head and that warmth filled Regulus's chest and suddenly it felt like this wouldn't be too bad. "Okay," he whispered.

James smiled, something soft and buttery. "I'll keep you updated, but don't worry too much. You two will be back before you know it. What's the worst that could happen?"

Regulus tried to smile, but he didn't quite succeed. James's face didn't fall though, he only smiled a little wider. They whispered good night to each other, a secret set of words that belonged only to them at that moment, and Regulus closed his door with a feeling of loss once James and his warmth were gone.

He'd returned to school the next day and was instantly pulled into a compartment by Luna and her newest friends, a set of people that Regulus found so destabilizing that he felt the ground give out for a second. Inside the compartment was Theo, the quiet Slytherin that Regulus had actually believed would be a good friend for Luna.

That wasn't surprising.

But next to him were Draco's little friends, the ones who used to follow him around in first year, the ones that Regulus had specifically told him to cut loose in an attempt to save them from his own fate. It took him a moment to remember their names. Crabbe and Goyle, he recalled slowly. It didn't feel good to compare them to their fathers, two vile Death Eaters that Regulus had had the displeasure of knowing, though only briefly.

Gregory and Vincent. That's what their names were. They gave him matching suspicious looks, ones that Regulus was sure were meant to be intimidating, though he only found it a little goofy.

"This is Regulus," Luna said, as if the five of them hadn't been going to school together for years. "He was almost in Slytherin."

Regulus snapped his gaze to her, but she just continued to smile in that kind, gentle way that left people totally unsuspecting to her treachery.

"Is that right?" Theo asked, his voice silky. He looked older than the last time Regulus had really looked at him, his shoulders a bit wider, his legs a bit longer. Closer to being a man, but still with that boyish frown that Regulus was very accustomed to.

"That's right," Regulus replied stiffly.

"Why weren't you?" Gregory asked, his bottom lip sticking out slightly. It made him look like he was pouting. Regulus nearly laughed, but he valiantly held it in.

"Sounded boring," Regulus said, putting on a smug smirk and a half-joking shrug like a suit of armor.

Theo rolled his eyes, but there was acceptance from all three of the Slytherins like they couldn't fault him for his choice. How strange, he thought, that Slytherins now were so similar to how they had been. Was this what Tom Riddle was like? Playing pretend as serious, acting like an adult when they were nothing but children.

He sat down next to Luna, choosing at that moment to accept her odd and unexpected friendship with the Slytherin boys. If she wanted to be close to them, then Regulus had no issue with it. She was a pureblood, so she would be safe enough as things got worse. At least, that was his hope. Besides, he'd just wanted her to have friends, that was all he'd needed. He couldn't dismiss her choice of friends now that she had them.

When they finally arrived at Hogwarts, he noticed Harry sticking close to Ron and Hermione, the three of them thick as thieves again now that Lavender and Ron had broken up. Although a few days later he realized that Harry likely didn't even know about the breakup, if his letters to James were any indication.

It didn't surprise Regulus given how much was on his mind, but it did make him feel sad. Harry was sixteen, he should be overly concerned with nonsense like his friend's failed relationship with a girl who hardly even liked him, to begin with. When Regulus had been sixteen, he'd been consumed with grief over losing James and overwhelmed with stress from the brand that marked his arm.

He'd felt like an adult pretending to be a child. He could still remember thinking about himself that way as if he was only going to school for show. He hadn't cared about his N.E.W.T.s. He hadn't cared about his future. He hadn't cared about much of anything.

It was strange now to actually be an adult pretending to be a child and yet feel so much younger than he had at sixteen. He felt less equipped to handle the world, less knowledgeable.

He wondered if Harry thought of himself the way Regulus had, as if he was just an adult being forced to act like a kid. The thought made him feel like he was in mourning like there was too much grief to go around. All he'd ever wanted was to make sure Harry was safe and that he'd had a good childhood, but it felt like everything was working against him.

Why did it have to be Harry? He thought selfishly. He knew it wasn't right, that he shouldn't wish it on anyone else, but Harry was so important. He deserved to feel happy and safe. Why did he have to be the one to suffer through all of this?

He tried not to dwell on it too much as the days went on, but it was difficult. Especially as the chasm between them grew by the minute. He hoped that they would find a way back to each other, but for now, he wouldn't push him. He didn't want Harry to feel trapped. That's what he kept telling himself at least. Maybe there was also a small part of him that didn't want to face Harry's rejection if he did try and reach out again.

The first Friday after they returned to school, Regulus was sitting in the library, working on some of the classwork he'd been neglecting for far too long. It was relatively quiet in the library despite how close they were to finals, but Hermione was up in the common room so he guessed that if even a study fiend like her wasn't working on school, then no one else was either.

He was expecting to spend the night alone when suddenly Lavender came flying in and sat down across from him, letting out a put-upon sigh like even the act of walking was too much for her to bother with.

“I need to talk to you,” she said seriously. Regulus placed his quill down on the desk, watching her carefully.

“Okay,” he said slowly.

She pursed her lips, looking away for a moment like she was trying to gather herself. “Did Parvati tell you about her list?”

Regulus paused for a moment before replying. He’d forgotten about Parvati’s misguided plan to find someone other than Lavender to be interested in, an entire list of girls that may or may not be interested in other girls. He’d put it out of his mind quickly after he’d been told about it. It didn’t feel like the kind of thing he should be involved in. Especially given that he didn’t think one could just pick who they had a crush on. If that were the case, he would have picked someone else, if only to make his life less painful.

“Yes,” he said, slowly and with a question in his tone. He couldn’t deny that he was curious.

“Don’t you think it’s wrong?”

Regulus furrowed his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“She’s just listing people like... I don’t know. They might not even be into her.”

“Right,” Regulus said, deeply confused. “But I guess that’s the idea. To, you know, find out if they are.” He couldn’t stop hearing the phrase ‘it’s wrong.’ Surely Lavender didn’t mean the fact that the list was filled with the names of other girls. Though they’d never talked about it. “Did she tell you about the list?” he asked. Maybe Lavender had just found it on her own, he thought.

She nodded. “Yeah, but she won’t show me anyone that’s on it!” She threw her hands up over her head. Madam Pince shushed them from somewhere else in the library, but Regulus barely heard it. Relief flooded through him.

“So you don’t know any of the names on the list?”

“No, she wouldn’t even give me a hint.”

“I’m surprised she told you about it,” he replied carefully. Her eyes narrowed.

“Do you know who is on the list?”

Regulus considered lying for a moment, he thought about just changing the subject and leaving it where it lay. That didn’t feel fair though, not to Lavender and not to Parvati.

“Not everyone,” he said truthfully.

“But you know some of them?”

“Yes, I know a few of them.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Tell me who they are.”

“Come on, Lavender,” he said, tilting his head slightly. “You know I’m not going to do that.”

“Why not?” she whined.

“Because it’s Parvati’s secret, it doesn’t belong to me. It wouldn’t be right for me to betray her confidence.”

“But I thought we were friends,” she said, sticking out her bottom lip in a pout. He smiled gently at her.

“We are friends, and if you tell me secrets, I won’t share them. Not even with Parvati.”

She pursed her lips again. “I think it’s weird that she told you.”

“Rude,” Regulus mumbled.

She rolled her eyes dramatically. “I just mean that the two of you used to be boyfriend-girlfriend —” Regulus tried not to flinch “— so I figured you would be jealous. Like why would she bring it up to you of all people?”

“Because we’re friends,” Regulus said, only a little bit stern. “We were friends before and we’re still friends now.”

“I’m her friend too,” Lavender said, genuine sadness in her voice.

Regulus chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. He felt like he was at the precipice of something, though he didn’t know what.

“Does it upset you?” Regulus asked

“That she didn’t tell me?”

“That she has a list,” Regulus corrected.

Lavender looked offended for a moment, but then her face settled in something thoughtful. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “Does it make me a bad friend if I say yes?”

Regulus shrugged. “That depends on why.”

She frowned. “I don’t know why,” she said instantly.

He gave her a pressing look, but her eyebrows only furrowed. “Think about it,” he encouraged. “If you imagined who might be on that list, what about Parvati potentially liking those people makes you so upset?”

Lavender shrugged frantically, almost as if her body was trying to backtrack from the conversation, trying to escape the way Regulus was encouraging her to dig deeper. But he realized now that this was a long time coming. Originally, he’d thought that Parvati was the

only one, but Lavender had a possessive streak too, she had strong feelings about who Parvati may or may not be interested in.

While that could just be a symptom of a friendship gone awry, Regulus felt that he knew Lavender fairly well and he didn't actually believe that that was the case. In fact, he thought that maybe Lavender's desperation to make things work with Ron when she was so clearly over him was just a symptom of this problem.

"You don't have to have the answer right now," he said gently. "But maybe talking to Parvati could help."

She seemed unsure about his suggestion, but eventually, she nodded. "I'm heading back to the common room," she said after a while, the silence of the library a sheltering place for her emotional turmoil. "Are you coming?"

He sighed. "Might as well," he said, yawning unexpectedly. He wasn't getting much done anyway. Besides, he hadn't written back to James yet that day, and he was looking forward to updating him.

She waited for him to pack up and they walked up together, talking idly about their upcoming apparition testing in a few weeks. Lavender was nervous about it, but she'd felt like she was improving so she was tentatively hopeful. Regulus wasn't nervous at all, though he'd been weighing the option of failing it if only just to keep things interesting.

The common room was unnaturally loud and they could hear voices and music emanating from the painting doorway as they approached it. He supposed it made sense, being a Friday night and all, but he still hadn't been expecting it. They said the password quickly and crawled inside.

The next moment seemed to happen in slow motion as if he wasn't quick enough to process what he was seeing.

There was a party in full swing going on inside the common room. Just upon first glance, Regulus could spot more than a few bottles of firewhiskey, though he didn't know who had planned it or what the party was for. Lavender laughed quietly next to him as if she was just as surprised.

Then directly across from them, over near the fireplace, they both spotted the same thing.

Parvati and Ginny Weasley, standing in the center of a group of their friends, slowly leaning towards one another, their eyes locked. Ginny, always the more daring of the two, then reached out and grabbed Parvati by the back of her neck and pulled her in, the two of them kissing as if there was no one else in the room.

It was like a direct replay of the night Lavender kissed Ron, except this time it wasn't Hermione turning to run out of the common room. Lavender spun in a rush of curls and heavily perfumed air, running through the portrait hole that hadn't fully closed from when they first came through. In a second she was gone and Regulus was left standing alone, watching everything unfold with remarkable helplessness.

The thing was that Regulus did not expect Ginny to be both on Parvati's list and also interested in girls. In fact, she seemed a bit boy-crazy to him, though perhaps that wasn't a fair assumption. It wasn't like the two of them talked all that often, but she'd always shown interest in boys in Hogwarts, even before some of her peers.

But then again, she seemed happy enough to kiss Parvati with everyone watching, so maybe she wasn't that picky when it came to gender. He knew that wasn't uncommon, though he never experienced those feelings himself.

After a moment, when he started to feel a bit weird about watching two teenagers kissing, he turned and left the common room, intent on trying to find Lavender, but he must have waited too long because she was nowhere to be found. And without the map, which Regulus was sure Harry kept close in hand all the time now, there was no way for him to locate her.

He gave up searching after a bit, resigning himself to talking to her the next day after she'd calmed down a bit, and went back up to the dorm room, settling onto his bed to finish his classwork and finally write a letter to James.

He didn't see Lavender again until Sunday, and when he did finally run into her, she acted like everything was fine.

"Parvati and Ginny are dating now, did you know that?" she said, delivering the words like they were a piece of hot gossip and not something that had upset her enough to vanish on Friday night.

"I didn't know that," Regulus said. He hadn't spoken to Parvati yet, but she'd been too busy to meet up. He'd actually spent most of the weekend sneaking out to the Quidditch pitch to watch Harry and the other Gryffindors practice. It wasn't a great use of his limited time, but it got his mind off of everything and he enjoyed seeing Harry in his element.

"I'm happy for them," Lavender said with a borderline manic grin. Regulus looked at her questioningly but it seemed almost like her eyes were pleading with him to drop it, to just let it go, so he decided not to bring it up again, at least not for the time being. If Lavender wasn't ready to address it, then he wasn't going to push.

However, as the next week passed, he started to worry that maybe Lavender was going to be a bigger danger than he'd originally thought. Parvati and Ginny debuted their relationship to the entire school Monday morning, walking into the Great Hall hand in hand, and given how popular Ginny was, it was huge news.

Regulus even overheard Hermione, Ron, and Harry discussing it.

"Did you know that Ginny liked girls?" Ron said to Hermione who gave him an annoyed look.

"No, Ronald. I didn't know that. But it doesn't change anything."

He threw his hands up defensively. "I never said that it did. Actually, if it keeps her from dating my dorm mates then I'm more than happy about it."

"Of course, that's what you'd be worried about," she said scornfully.

"Sorry if I'm not overly invested in the dating life of my sister," he replied snarkily. Harry snorted a laugh. It was the first laugh Regulus had heard from him in weeks and the sound instantly brought a smile to his face.

"What do you think, Harry?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrow imperiously.

Harry shrugged, looking vaguely confused. "About what?" he asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "About Ginny and Parvati."

Harry stared at her for a long moment. "I mean, as long as it doesn't interfere with the last game of the season, I don't really care."

Hermione blew out a long breath, muttering the word "boys" under her breath.

The news of them dating blew over relatively quickly and within a few days everyone had moved on to the next big news. Things were starting to calm down a bit, and though things with Harry hadn't changed, Draco was still avoiding him, and he still had yet to figure out the issue with Slughorn or what to do about Dumbledore, Regulus was starting to relax.

That was his biggest mistake, looking back. He let his guard down when he should have been more vigilant. It was Saturday afternoon, over a week since Parvati and Ginny's moment in the common room, when it happened.

Regulus was in the Great Hall, lazily eating lunch while reading the book Luna had given him at the beginning of the year, the one full of stories by the muggle author Kafka. He found the stories a bit depressing if he was honest and he couldn't stop wondering if this was really how Pandora had seen him, just a sad loner with nothing but dark clouds over his head.

He hated that she probably wasn't wrong.

The Great Hall was slowly filling with students, most of them coming in for a quick lunch before heading back outside. It was one of the first truly sunny days of the year and it was warm enough that most of the student body was trying to soak up the weather. Regulus was even considering heading out to the boathouse himself to get some fresh air.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting a few seats down from him, their heads bowed in together as they spoke. Hermione kept shooting nervous looks over at Regulus but he was doing his best to ignore it. It was putting him on edge.

He glanced down at his plate again, taking another slow bite, then looked up at the door right as Draco came walking in. He was just as thin as he had been at the beginning of the year, his lack of meals still taking their toll on his body. He had a glamour over his skin, but Regulus could see something through it, almost like a sheen or a sparkle that he could only see out of the corner of his eye. If he looked directly at Draco, he couldn't see it, but when he turned his

head, he was sure it was there. He couldn't figure out what it was, but in an instant, he was sure that Harry saw it too.

He'd abandoned his conversation with Hermione and Ron, his jaw clenched as he stared Draco down. Regulus turned his head to look at Draco again, the two of them making eye contact instantly. Draco's fists clenched, though his face stayed completely blank.

He looked caught though, Regulus realized, like a wild animal. After a split second, Draco took a heaving breath, so intense that Regulus could see his chest move, then he turned and all but ran out of the Great Hall.

Regulus shook his head, confused by what he'd just seen, but he was instantly distracted by the way Harry jumped out of his seat, rushing out of the Great Hall after Draco with a look of fierce determination. Regulus's heart skipped a beat, panic, and adrenaline rushing through him. He should follow him, he thought, but he couldn't get himself to move.

Surely Harry wouldn't do anything. James had said that he'd stopped bringing Draco up. They'd both assumed that that meant he wasn't as worried about him, but then again, that look on his face... Regulus had seen it so many times before, and it didn't always lead to the best decisions, but Harry wasn't stupid. He wouldn't do something terrible. He wasn't that kind of kid, was he?

"Ron?" Hermione said a minute later, concern obvious in her voice. Regulus looked over sharply just in time to watch Ron blink three times, each time his eyes shifted from his standard blue to an unsettling white that Regulus had never seen before. It was so rapid that he might have missed it otherwise.

Regulus felt his body tense as Ron turned to look at him, his face pale and covered in sweat. He wanted to ask what was happening but it was like his jaw was locked closed. Finally, Ron opened his mouth.

"Harry," he breathed, devastation and worry decorating his words. Regulus was up and out of his seat in an instant. He didn't know what Ron had seen, but it was clear that it meant something. He should have gone right away, he thought desperately, sprinting out into the hall. Now he had no idea where they'd gone.

He headed down the hallway, his heart pounding in his chest. Where did they go? Where? He passed by Snape who was in the midst of talking to a third year, a deep-set frown on his face as the young girl rambled on about something or other. He noticed Snape give him a curious look, but he didn't stop to speak to him. Surely if he'd seen Harry rushing after Draco he would have done something. He slowed to a jog, lost and anxious.

"No! No! Stop it!" Myrtle's suddenly echoed out of the bathroom at the end of the corridor he was in. "Stop! STOP!"

Regulus took off running again toward the sound, hearing the sound of Snape moving behind him. As he ran, horrible ideas rushed through his head. He couldn't help but think of Draco or Harry injured, one of them bleeding out in the bathroom, one of them dead... He felt sick.

If he hadn't been running, he would have bent over at the waist and thrown up right there in the middle of the hallway.

He burst into the bathroom only a few seconds after Myrtle's screams abruptly cut off. His eyes darted around rapidly, taking in the destroyed bathroom, the stalls torn to bits by rough spells, one of the sinks spraying water, and two of the mirrors shattered.

He panted, searching for blood, searching for injury, but then his eyes landed on something he'd never expected to see. Up against the far wall of the bathroom were Draco and Harry wrapped around each other like a pair of Devil's Snare plants trying to mate. Harry's back was against the wall, Draco's thigh pushed between his legs. The sounds of their tongues moving were disturbingly loud in the tiled room.

Snape came barreling into the bathroom a second later, screeching to a halt in the same way Regulus had. He seemed to see them instantly, and Regulus could see the way his body froze, tensing as if preparing for a fight.

Regulus, for his part, had no idea what to say or do. His mind was completely blank as he tried to understand what he was seeing. Then Snape spoke and his voice seemed to break the spell that had come under the entire room.

"I'm holding you responsible for this," he said, directing the words right at Regulus.

the denial.

Harry was sure that Regulus was going to kill him. For real this time. Not like before when Regulus had just looked a bit disappointed or the few times he'd yelled at him. This time was different because this time Harry had been acting like a total and utter knob for weeks for no apparent reason. He couldn't even really remember, it was all a haze like trying to run through the pouring rain to keep from getting wet, water flying into his eyes and blurring his vision.

It was so frustrating. It was like his brain was some kind of uninhabitable monster, some hellish wasteland where nothing could grow. And yet, when he tried to inspect it, to trace where it all began, he couldn't find a single trail. It was all empty. There was nothing to tell him what he was missing.

"Potter," Malfoy hissed. "Stop shaking your leg like that. You're driving me insane."

Harry gritted his teeth angrily. He and Malfoy were stuck in two tiny chairs next to Dumbledore's office door, sitting side by side, shoulder to shoulder, like they were just a pair of friends getting in trouble for playing a prank or being out after dark.

When he thought about the real reason he was in trouble, he felt the strongest desire to squeeze his eyes shut. Why had he done that? He was horrified by what he'd done. It was just another mystery, he decided, another untraceable thread.

It felt like years ago that he'd started to lose touch with reality. He remembered whispering and odd and disconnected feelings that would come and go as freely as students visiting Honeydukes. He'd tried to ask about them, maybe it was Ron he was talking to, or Hermione. He shook his head. Maybe James, his father.

He couldn't recall now.

But he tried to ask someone, and they'd told him it was normal, that everyone felt that way, but he didn't know how that could be true. How could everyone else feel like this and continue on as normal? Had he not phrased it right? Had he not gotten his point across? He felt like he was going insane.

He vaguely remembered the paranoia building, but by that point, it was like he was barely there, as if he was slowly being possessed like Regulus with Tom Riddle's diary in second year. In retrospect, it was actually terrifying. The thought that he could lose control like that and come out the other end having destroyed his relationship with Regulus made him feel sick to his stomach.

What was even worse was that he could barely track what brought him out of it.

He remembered following Malfoy into the bathroom, furious and scared, both emotions swirling together, making his body vibrate with energy that had nowhere to go. He remembered Malfoy turning around, tears on his face, and letting loose a hex before Harry

could ask what was wrong. Not that he would have asked that. This was Malfoy that they were talking about. He didn't care if he was okay or not.

It was just a bit weird to see him crying, that was all. Or crying in private, he guessed. It seemed like it wouldn't be that weird of an occurrence to see him crying in public, if only for attention. Harry's thoughts drifted to Pansy fawning over Malfoy in third year when he'd injured himself in Care of Magical Creatures. He rolled his eyes. Why did she have to touch him like that? The memory of it made his chest feel tight as if someone was slowly crushing him.

So he wasn't worried about Malfoy crying, but even if he had been, which he *wasn't*, he definitely didn't care after Malfoy started trying to jinx him. Harry had fought back with vigor, the bathroom fixing paying the price as the stalls and sink faucets blasted apart over their dodged spells.

His heart had been pounding, blood rushing in his ears. He'd felt more alert than he had in weeks as if the cloud had finally been lifted. It was like all he needed was to fight with Malfoy. Honestly, that was easy enough, he could always do that next time.

But then again — and he really hated to admit this to himself — that wasn't when the paranoia finally left, that wasn't when the whispering stopped. No, it wasn't until their spells grew more violent, more targeted, more dangerous, when Malfoy started panting, his blonde hair falling over his gray eyes in a way that Harry found stupid and annoying.

It wasn't until Malfoy took three menacing steps toward him, and Harry reached out to shove him away, dropping his wand in the process. He hadn't pulled him closer, he definitely hadn't put his arm around Malfoy's neck — it was slightly higher than Harry's, he didn't remember Malfoy being so tall — and he really, definitely, certainly hadn't touched Malfoy's hair. It hadn't even been soft. Or it wouldn't have been had he touched it. *Which he hadn't*.

Malfoy had kissed him, not the other way around. Harry was just surprised, that was all. He was just a bit overwhelmed with all the fighting and the panting and the whispers. Then Malfoy's lips had touched his — so gross, he couldn't believe that happened — and suddenly he couldn't hear a single thing.

There was no paranoia or whispering or rogue emotions. It was just silence. He was probably just so disgusted by it, that was really the only explanation.

Maybe the disgust was worth it if it meant he no longer had to feel the anxiety he'd been feeling for weeks. He supposed if he had to kiss Malfoy again just to not feel that way then it wasn't so bad. Obviously, it was terrible. The worst thing that ever happened to him. But he'd had to do a lot of terrible things. It wouldn't be so bad if he had to do them again.

Especially if it meant he could fix his relationship with Regulus.

Their kiss — the kiss Malfoy initiated and continued, Harry played no part — had been interrupted by the sound of Snape saying, "I'm holding you responsible for this."

Harry had felt his heart skip a beat and he'd placed both palms against Malfoy's chest, shoving him away so roughly that Malfoy took three skittering steps backward.

"What's your problem?" Malfoy snarled.

"He kissed me," Harry said frantically, looking over to find Regulus standing there, watching them with a blank face. *He hates me*, Harry had thought upon seeing Regulus's empty eyes. Then Snape had demanded they follow him to Dumbledore's office, repeating over and over again that they wouldn't get away with fighting on school grounds, not again.

Regulus had walked behind them, Malfoy and Harry walking side by side behind Snape. Malfoy had been hanging his head forward the entire way, his hair, which had grown too long in the last few months, was hanging over his eyes. Not that Harry was looking. Just like he wasn't looking now.

"Stop staring at me," Malfoy grumbled.

"I'm not," Harry said. He was. Accidentally. He was just... confused. And distracted. And so bored. They'd been sitting there for over an hour now. How long did it take to tell Dumbledore that they'd been fighting? Couldn't he just give them detention and let them go?

Surely Harry wasn't in trouble because Malfoy kissed him. It's not like it was his fault. And it wasn't, like, illegal or anything. He didn't think. Everyone else was super normal about it. He was trying to be normal about it too. He'd been trying to at least. It was just a bit difficult. He didn't feel good about that piece of him, the one that he knew came from the Dursleys. It wasn't like they'd been right about anything else — his parents weren't unemployed drunks who died in a car accident and magic wasn't bad — but it was hard to get their voices out of his head sometimes.

"Draco," Snape's voice made both of their heads snap up. "Come inside." Malfoy paused for a moment, a slight shake to his hands that Harry hadn't noticed before, but he slowly stood and walked into the office.

That was weird, Harry thought. It was strange that they would give them their punishments separately. Distantly, Harry wondered if he would be expelled. It was strange to feel indifferent to that prospect. He would be sad not to attend Hogwarts anymore, but really, he would make it work outside of school. He was old enough now to figure things out.

Surely, Sirius wouldn't throw him out. Unless Regulus told him to, which Harry couldn't predict if he would or not, but even if Regulus told Sirius too, Harry was still moderately sure that Sirius wouldn't do it. Remus would probably stop him, or at least James would. James wouldn't want him to go back to the Dursleys or end up on the streets.

He sighed. He wondered if there would ever be a time in his life when everything didn't feel so impermanent. It was even worse feeling like this was all his fault. If he'd just trusted Regulus...

He couldn't figure out why he hadn't. Yes, Regulus had kept the truth of what Sirius and Remus were doing to himself, but it made sense. Regulus was clearly just worried about

them, and he wouldn't have wanted to tell Harry something that would stress him out. That was classic Regulus, it shouldn't have surprised Harry.

Not even Regulus helping Malfoy should have surprised him. They were related after all, and Regulus seemed to feel more protective over students than most other adults. He was just like that, very caring. It honestly made Harry think of Regulus's animagus form, the way he'd react so violently if someone tried to hurt someone he loved.

He groaned softly, rubbing his eyes tiredly. Why hadn't he trusted him? He should have just trusted him. But looking back he couldn't figure out why he hadn't. It was like someone else was controlling him, but he didn't want to believe that was true. It was too scary.

If it was true, if Harry wasn't in control, then... then he wasn't safe to be around, he realized. He couldn't stay with his friends or his family. He couldn't stay at Hogwarts. He would just be putting everyone in danger by sticking around. But where would he even go? Especially with Voldemort out there trying to kill him.

He didn't want to be bad, but he kept messing up, he kept making mistakes. He didn't feel like anyone else made mistakes like he did.

He settled deeper into the chair, resolutely not thinking about his kiss with Malfoy, and doing his best to hold off on overthinking about what would happen to him. He wished he could ask Regulus, even if it meant Regulus yelled at him. He just wanted to talk to him. Regulus would know how to fix everything. He always did.

At some point during the long period of waiting for them to come back out, Harry drifted off into a restless sleep. He'd been so tired recently, the constant Quidditch practices not helping his consistent exhaustion, and despite how much of a wreck his life was in, he somehow felt more relaxed knowing that punishment was coming. At least he understood that part of life, the only consistent part of life.

"Are you planning on spending the night here?" Malfoy sneered, making Harry's eyes shoot open. He was standing over him, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. He looked different, the circles under his eyes much darker than they were a few hours ago, his hair lacking the bright shine it usually had.

He looked ill, Harry realized, but his eyes had an unnatural brightness to them that made Harry struggle to look away.

"They haven't told me I could go yet," Harry mumbled, rubbing the side of his face. How long had he been out here?

"Snape said he'd told you you could leave," Malfoy replied.

"Well, Snape lied," Harry said snidely. Malfoy rolled his eyes infuriatingly. Harry's hands clenched into fists, his nails digging into his palms. Malfoy made him so angry. There was no way Harry would have willingly kissed him.

"Why did you do it?" Malfoy asked suddenly, his voice quieter than it was a moment before.

“Why did I fall asleep?” Harry asked mockingly. “This might be a bit confusing for you, but people usually sleep because they’re tired.”

“No, you prick. Why did you kiss me?” Malfoy snapped.

Harry gasped. “I didn’t kiss you.”

“Excuse me?” Malfoy looked offended now.

“You kissed me,” Harry accused, pointing his finger sharply at Malfoy’s face.

Malfoy gave a disbelieving laugh. “I definitely didn’t kiss you. I would kiss everyone else in this castle before I willingly kissed you.”

“Well, same here! I would rather kiss Neville’s toad than kiss you!” Harry shouted.

“Then why—” he broke off with a frustrated growl, blinking furiously. His eyes looked so odd, so entrancing. Harry couldn’t look away from them.

“What’s wrong with you?” Harry asked, softer than he meant to, he almost sounded worried. How mortifying.

“That’s none of your business, Potter,” Malfoy snarled, then turned away, rubbing furiously at his face, the muscles in his back flexing and twitching. It looked painful.

“Malfoy—” Harry reached out, putting his hand on his shoulder. Malfoy whipped around instantly, placing one hand roughly on Harry’s chest and shoving him against the wall. He was strong, Harry realized, much stronger than Harry would have expected.

“Don’t touch me!” Malfoy said through clenched teeth. Harry couldn’t even bring himself to blink, he couldn’t look away, his heart racing, his stomach muscles tightening.

“Draco,” Snape’s voice interrupted once again. “I believe I told you to return to your dorm.”

Malfoy’s eyes flitted around Harry’s face one more time before he pulled away swiftly and all but sprinted down the spiral staircase away from Dumbledore’s office. “You as well, Potter. Go back to your common room and stay there.”

Harry didn’t need to be told twice. There was something happening to him, something he couldn’t explain, and he needed to get to a private place as soon as possible. He all but sprinted back to the common room.

“Harry! Where were you? We were looking everywhere for you!” Hermione said frantically when she noticed him come through the portrait hole. Harry didn’t even look at her.

“Sorry, Hermione,” he shouted over his shoulder and rushed up the stairs to his dorm. He heard Ron shout something after him, but he wasn’t listening to him, he could barely hear anything over his thoughts, screaming against his skull that something was horribly *wrong*.

He slammed into the dorm room, double-checking that it was empty before rushing into the bathroom. It was thankfully unoccupied. He didn't know what to do with himself, panic surging through him, so in a moment of mindlessness, he shed all of his clothes and jumped into the shower, turning the water as cold as it would go. It hit his overheated skin with a hiss and he let out a long breath of relief, standing stock still under the spray, waiting for the feelings — and the very unfortunate thing happening below his hips — to go away.

This was all so confusing. What was happening to him? What was wrong with him?

He didn't know how long he stood there, waiting for the cold to wash it all away, but when he finally shut off the water, his teeth were chattering and his lips were blue. He wrapped a towel around himself and walked back into the dorm room, ignoring the curious looks from his dormmates — Regulus was still missing — while he dressed in his pajamas and crawled into bed.

He'd meant to close the curtains, to look at the map for a while, but the moment his head hit the pillow, he was out like a light, darkness swallowing up the rest of his worries.

The next time he opened his eyes, the sun was shining into the dorm room, so bright that his face felt hot and his eyes hurt. He glanced over at Ron's bed, he was already facing that direction so it wasn't too difficult. His bed was a mess, the blankets strewn about like he'd been tossing and turning all night.

Harry felt a sudden wave of guilt, he hadn't been a very attentive friend recently. He barely remembered any of the conversations he'd had with Ron in the last few months, everything since Christmas was a blur. He had no idea what was going on in Ron's life at the moment, he didn't know what was going on between him and Lavender, he didn't know how his classes were going. He barely knew how Quidditch practice was going and he was there to witness it.

He groaned softly, turning on his back and staring up at the red curtains above him. He felt so foolish. He rubbed his eyes and moved to get out of bed, turning just enough to realize that he wasn't alone in the room.

Laying in the bed next to him was Regulus. He was propped up on his pillows, his head bowed over a book. He glanced over at Harry out of the corner of his eye for just a split second, so quick that Harry almost missed it, before looking back at his book.

"Hey," Harry said roughly, then cringed. He should say something better, something that wasn't just 'hey.' He didn't know where to start though. "What time is it?"

"Just passed noon," Regulus responded blandly. Harry's heart sank. He hated him. It was too late. "You slept pretty late."

There was a question in Regulus's voice, but Harry didn't know how to answer it. "Yeah, I guess I was tired."

Regulus nodded slowly. "Do you feel more rested?"

Harry shrugged, his words caught in his throat, all the apologies, everything. “Am I in trouble?”

“In trouble?” Regulus asked.

“For fighting with Malfoy,” Harry said.

“Oh,” Regulus said, his shoulders dropping slightly. “Yeah.”

Harry waited for him to go on and when he didn’t, he said, “What’s going to happen?”

“Snape said he told you?” Regulus said questioningly.

Harry couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “I was asleep in the chair. I think he just said it to me while I was out so that I would get in more trouble.”

Regulus snorted, a soft sound that made something in Harry’s chest loosen a bit. “He’s such a dickhead,” Regulus said, shaking his head slightly. “You have detention for the next four weeks. It’s not ideal, but it could have been worse.”

“Oh, okay,” Harry said, relaxing back against the bed again. He really had expected it to be worse, but he’d had detention before. He could deal with it again.

“You seem different this morning,” Regulus said after a long moment. He was watching Harry searchingly, his eyes keen. Harry felt his cheeks grow hot.

“I’m sorry, okay?” Harry blurted out inelegantly.

“Huh?” Regulus asked, shocked.

“I’m sorry about—” he waved his hands around over his head, “about everything. I didn’t realize — I didn’t know what was going on. I’m sorry.” Suddenly, and without warning, Harry burst into tears. He didn’t like to cry, he hated it so much, and yet he felt like he was always accidentally doing it in front of people.

“Harry, no, no, it’s okay,” Regulus said, rushing the words out. Harry sat up in bed, trying as hard as he could to get the tears to stop, but that only seemed to make them worse. Regulus was there the moment he was sitting up, kneeling on the side of his bed, leaning over him.

Regulus placed his hands on Harry’s shoulders. Harry almost wanted to throw him off, the feeling so sharp and instant that he almost did it without question. It was that knee-jerk response that made him realize there was something wrong with it, there was something foreign about the urge.

“Harry, please breathe. You’re scaring me.”

Harry tried to suck in air, but it was a struggle at first.

“What is happening to me?” he asked, begging for an answer.

Regulus made a terrible noise, a sound almost like he'd been stabbed, and then he pulled Harry in for a real hug, wrapping his arms so tightly around him that it was nearly suffocating. Harry blew out a long breath, his body relaxing in an instant.

"It's my fault," Regulus whispered. "I should have told you, but I didn't want to make things worse and I didn't want you to know before I had a solution."

"What?" Harry mumbled, the word barely audible from how it was muffled by Regulus's shoulder.

Regulus pulled away then, a look of pain flashing across his face. "I'm going to tell you everything that I can, but I need you to understand that I never wanted anything bad to happen to you. I know you don't believe me, but all I've ever wanted was for you to be safe and happy."

Harry frowned. "I know that," he said.

Regulus tilted his head to the side. "I thought you didn't trust me."

Harry sighed, breaking eye contact. He couldn't bear to look at him any longer. "I don't know why I thought that. I shouldn't have thought that."

He could feel Regulus searching his face again, but he couldn't bring himself to look up. "It wasn't you. Not really."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

Regulus let out a low breath, his shoulders tensing, and then he moved farther away so that he was standing. "I can't tell you everything. I want you to know that. It's not safe for you to know, for anyone to know, but I can tell you part of it."

Harry felt lost, but he nodded in agreement.

"And you can't research it," Regulus said quickly. "You'll want to, I know, but you have to understand Harry. *No one can know*. Not Hermione. Not Ron. No one. If the wrong person learns about this, we will lose. Do you understand?"

"Lose what?" Harry asked.

"The war," Regulus said grimly, deadly serious. Harry swallowed harshly.

"Does anyone else know besides you?"

Regulus nodded. "Sirius, Remus, and James know everything. We've been working together to find a solution. That's what Sirius and Remus were doing. I found an obscure ritual and I sent them to go learn about it."

"Oh," Harry said thoughtfully. "James knows?"

“Yes,” Regulus said, then quickly added, “please don’t be upset with him for not telling you. We’ve been doing everything in our power to keep this a secret.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly. “I won’t talk to anyone about it, now can you tell me what’s happening?”

Regulus took another deep breath. “I don’t know how it happened exactly, there is some magic that is so old that it’s not written anywhere. I think it had something to do with Lily, with your mother, but the night the Da— You-Know-Who tried to kill you, he failed because of something Lily did. His magic backfired.”

“I know all of this,” Harry said quickly.

“Right,” Regulus replied. “Well, what you don’t know is that the backfired spell didn’t just destroy You-Know-Who’s body, it broke off a piece of his soul.”

“His soul?” Harry asked incredulously.

“That soul fragment—” Regulus gritted his teeth like he didn’t want to say his next words. Harry’s stomach swooped uncomfortably. “That soul fragment needed something to attach to.”

“No,” Harry breathed, his mouth catching on before his brain.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus said regretfully. “It is attached to you, Harry. A piece of You-Know-Who lives inside of you. It has been since you were a baby.”

“No,” Harry repeated, standing up from his bed and digging his fingers into his hair, tugging on it roughly. “This can’t be happening. He’s — It’s inside me?”

Regulus nodded once. “I didn’t know forever, it was only recently that I learned, since that moment I’ve been looking for a way to free you from it.”

“And the emotions I’ve been feeling, the whispers? Is that him?”

“The whispers?” Regulus asked, his eyebrows shooting halfway up his forehead.

“I swear I hear... whispering. It’s not like real whispering, I don’t know how to explain it.”

Regulus’s chest moved like he was silently panting, like he was struggling to function, his face fell back into one of determination. Harry guessed that he pushed his stress away, Regulus seemed good at that kind of thing.

“Okay, we’re coming back to that. What changed? Why are you able to talk to me like normal today?”

“I’m sorry,” Harry repeated, guilt making his heart hurt. Regulus waved him off.

“You’ve already been forgiven, you never needed to ask,” Regulus said, as if it was that easy, as if everything that was wrong with Harry wasn’t something he needed to worry about

because Regulus didn't believe it to be. "Do you know when things changed? When the whispers stopped?"

Harry bit down roughly on his bottom lip, looking away like if he couldn't see Regulus then he couldn't be embarrassed by what he already knew to be true.

"Harry, I'm not going to judge you, whatever it is." Harry bided his time for one more moment before answering.

"It was Malfoy," he said. Regulus's still body seemed to freeze even further, like ice had just filled his bloodstream, and though he'd just said that he wouldn't judge Harry, Harry suddenly didn't believe him. Maybe this was a step too far. Maybe something was irredeemably wrong with him.

"Okay," Regulus said finally, a long beat of silence proceeding it.

"Okay?" Harry asked.

"That... actually makes sense," Regulus said.

"How does that make sense?" Harry demanded. He finally looked back up to find Regulus fighting a smile. He was losing that battle very quickly. "Don't laugh!"

"I'm sorry, you're right," Regulus said, only a small chuckle slipping out. "I'm not laughing at you, I promise. I'm just — It makes sense that you might have a big... release of emotions after—" He cut himself off with a raised eyebrow, watching Harry like he expected Harry to finish that sentence. If he was expecting that, then he would be waiting for the rest of his life, because Harry wasn't saying a single word.

"I still feel the emotions now. Just a bit, but they're still there. He didn't cure me!" he argued. Regulus bit the inside of his cheek, Harry could tell that he was trying not to laugh again. Finally, after another long moment, Regulus seemed to calm down, his face settling back into something serious.

"You know, Harry, it's okay if you, you know, like Draco," he said slowly.

"I don't," Harry replied sharply. Regulus put his hands up in front of himself.

"I'm just saying," Regulus said, "no one would fault you for it. It's completely normal."

"It's not normal, it's Malfoy! And I don't—I do not fancy him."

"All right," Regulus said, though Harry had strong suspicions that he didn't believe him. "Let's circle back to the whispers you were hearing."

Harry nearly relaxed, Voldemort's soul living inside him was a much easier topic than Malfoy. Before he could let it go, he couldn't help but say, "Please don't tell Ja—my dad about Malfoy."

Regulus paused for a second as if he hadn't been expecting that request, then he walked toward Harry slowly and put his hands back on his shoulders, he looked solemn. "Harry," he said softly. "I've already told him."

Harry shoved him off with a laugh that punched its way out of him. Regulus's solemn expression cracked into one of mischief. "How could you?" Harry asked through his laughter.

"I'm sorry," Regulus said, not sounding sorry at all. "I had to tell someone. He won't tell anyone."

"He's going to tell Sirius and Remus!"

"He won't," Regulus said. "I gave him strict instructions not to. Don't worry, your secret is safe with us. Besides, if you don't fancy Draco, then there is nothing to tell, right?"

Harry shook his head, and though he wanted to be angry and petulant, all he felt was relief.

the moon phases.

There was a lot of false information out in the world about the lives of werewolves, especially their daily, non-full-moon lives.

Some of the information was true. They did forcibly change into a man-eating monster every time the full moon gazed down with her unforgiving light. They did struggle to recover each month, their body teetering under the weight of being torn apart every few weeks. And they did prematurely age, growing gray long before their peers.

Those things were basically common knowledge, every moderately educated third-year could list those off with little to no trouble.

Some of it was less well-known but still correct. People with lycanthropy became more wolfish in the days leading up to the full moon, preferring their meat raw, their canines a little too sharp. They had shorter tempers, they were stronger, and they were nearly uncontrollable if they needed to be restrained.

Some believed werewolves were like that all the time, that the wolfishness lived beneath their skin every moment of the day, but that wasn't true. In fact, people with lycanthropy experienced a wide array of emotional extremes, anger being only a small subset of it.

James had never gotten much out of angry, super strong, aggressive Remus. When he was a boy, he found that version of Remus very intimidating, and though he would always be there when Remus needed him, he would give him a much wider berth than usual during that time of the month.

Sirius was the opposite, he found that version of Remus electric and impossible to walk away from. Long before any of them knew what love or attraction truly meant, Sirius would watch Remus in his wolfy state and practically start drooling. He would pick fights with him just to see Remus's eyes glow a little more golden, as if he could see Moony in the daytime, as if he wanted Moony to see him, to know who he was.

"Moony is Padfoot's best friend," Sirius told James after they first became animagi. James took great offense to that, gasping angrily.

"Excuse me?!"

"Don't be jealous," Sirius said with a smirk. "He's the alpha, of course, Padfoot would like him."

"Alpha wolves aren't even a real thing," Peter informed them. "I looked it up. It's just a myth."

"See!" James said, but Sirius wouldn't budge. He loved Moony, probably a bit too much, but James, ever the stag, had to work not to run from the wild beast. He loved Remus, and he would stick by him no matter what, but that didn't change how scared it made him.

So James didn't prefer pre-full moon Remus, then or now, especially now actually. Living in a house with just a werewolf and a dog too interested in provoking the wolf was a bit too much sometimes.

Though he'd never admit it, mostly because it made him sound like a shit friend, James preferred the Remus that came when the moon was a waning crescent, nearly the new moon. It was the full moon phase that the general public seemed to know the least about.

The moon phases went like this. The full moon started and ended the phase, a blinding light of pain in the middle of a difficult but otherwise manageable cycle. The wolf would be clawing at the skin long before the full moon, hence their extra wolf qualities leading up to it, but the full moon stuck around just as long.

During the days after the full moon, those first few waning gibbous moons, the wolf would be right there under the surface. One time James woke Remus the morning after the moon and found the wolf's eyes staring back at him, golden and inhuman. He wasn't nearly as snappish, but he still took on wolf-like qualities. He was overly touchy, sometimes nuzzling his head against his friend's before he suddenly remembered he wasn't actually an animal. He liked to sleep in a pile — according to Sirius, for the most part, though James wasn't opposed to joining them if everyone kept their clothes on — and he loved to play fight, jovial and silly as he poked fun at his friends.

As the moon moved to the third quarter, on its way to a new moon, Remus grew cold. Really cold. Shaking under several layers of blankets, jumpers, and socks cold. He shivered at all hours of the day, his teeth chattering at night. Only Sirius could warm him, and that was only enough to keep him from actively quivering. It was like his bones had given out on staying alive, like the blood in his veins had grown tired after the transformation.

The cold days were reflected on the opposite side of the full, during the first quarter. Remus would get hot. Feverishly hot. He would sweat all the time, and James would find him sitting in their chilly dorm room in nothing but a thin pair of pants. It was always a jarring sight given how modest he was the rest of the month, but Remus would always look so desperately uncomfortable that James couldn't even fault him.

It was even stranger to see the same thing happening at Grimmauld Place. James would wake up to an icy cold house, his toes frozen in his bed, and he would know that Remus was somewhere in the house half-clothed. James didn't complain about it, mostly because it wasn't a terrible sight. Mid-thirties Remus, long-limbed and unconventionally handsome, walking around in nothing but his boxers? What was James going to do? *Not* look?

Besides, he'd heard every single detail about Remus and Sirius's sex life since he was sixteen, and he was currently celibate pining after a man who he only got to talk to through letters. No one could fault him for looking.

Not even Sirius. James knew that for sure because he was once caught looking a bit too long and his eyes flicked over to Sirius just in time to watch him smirk knowingly.

For a while, James thought their friendship would never go back to the way it had been, but then one day, a week or so after Sirius returned from his trip to Norway, Sirius had snuck into

James's bedroom, curled up in bed beside him, and started telling him every single detail of the sex he'd had with Remus in the forest.

If it had been anyone else, James would have kicked them out of his room, but it was Sirius, and James loved Sirius and James loved Remus. He was very happy that they were together, that they were engaged, that they got the time they deserved, and if it meant he had to hear — in excruciating detail — how Remus had pinned Sirius against the forest floor then he would listen.

And if it fed his own forest-related daydreams then that was fine too.

So the first quarter was hot, and James didn't mind that so much, but he could feel the full moon breathing down his neck once he saw Remus sweating and he knew that terrifying, imposing Remus was on his way.

Remus was the most normal during the new moon, the full weeks away and distant from his mind. Right as the moon started to fill, his limbs would grow achy, his joints popping every time he sat still for too long, but during the new moon, there was a moment of peace. Sometimes during the new moon, James would look at Remus and wonder what kind of man he would have turned out to be had he never been bitten.

Would he still have been a Gryffindor? Would he have been sorted somewhere else? Would they have even been friends? The thought made him sad, the idea that he would have never met that odd loner bookworm, that he wouldn't have gotten to see his two friends grow together and fall in love.

Right after the new moon, Remus became what James liked to call a "craft werewolf." Something about that post-new moon energy made Remus want to start things. He would start crafts, projects, potions, and a whole other host of odd things. They rarely lasted, mostly because as the rest of the moon cycle took its toll, Remus lost the desire to work on anything at all, but it was always fun to see what Remus cooked up that time of the month.

Since returning from his trip with Sirius, he'd mostly been focused on planning their wedding. Every time he threw himself into it for a few days, Sirius would look overjoyed, his cheeks flushed with pleasure and love as he watched his fiancée obsess over the minute details of their wedding that wouldn't likely happen.

Not because they wouldn't get married, James was sure they would be married before the summer months were gone, but with the way things were headed, he doubted they would be able to throw the extravagant party befitting a Marauder, let alone two.

At first glance, someone might suspect that that was James's favorite part of the moon cycle, his favorite iteration of Remus, but that wouldn't be true, although James loved to start things and he was more than willing to help Remus on whatever endeavors he was focused on.

No, James's favorite time of the month was likely Remus's least favorite, it was at least one of them, because in the few days leading up to the new moon, when the moon was just a sliver of light in the sky, waiting to be covered by shadows, Remus would become terribly

weepy. It was really a sight to behold, a full-grown werewolf tearing up at the smallest little thing. James loved it. He *loved* it.

When they were children, he hadn't understood this time of the month. Actually, he'd thought that Remus was just mad at them. He'd thought that every single month for two years before discovering Remus's furry little secret. Remus would disappear to Merlin knows where, and James would get into a sulk, convinced that he was about to lose the friend he'd just gained.

When they'd learned about Remus's secret, James started to piece together the drastic changes in Remus's mood and personality as the days went passed, but still, those days before the new moon remained a mystery. It wasn't until October of fourth year that James figured it out.

Sirius was such a prat that year. James still loved him, because he always loved him, but things were getting bad with his family — bad enough that he wasn't talking about it, not even in passing, which James would learn later was a very bad sign — and he'd started acting up in classes and sneaking around with anyone who asked him out. James knew nothing was really going on between Sirius and those people because of a whispered secret at the end of third year, but that didn't change the fact that from the outside, to everyone that wasn't James, it seemed like Sirius was available to anyone that wanted him.

James hadn't thought it was a big deal. People loved to gossip about Sirius and it seemed to help more than hurt his reputation to be seen as a philanderer. He hadn't realized that anyone would be bothered by it, let alone one of his closest friends, until those tenuous days before the new moon.

Remus was missing, as he always was, and Peter was serving detention for being late to class for the fourth time in two weeks, and James was lonely and very bored. He'd wanted to go out of the Quidditch Pitch but it had been raining so hard that the walk to the pitch alone would have been treacherous. They didn't have the map yet in those days, but he knew that Sirius was hidden in the castle somewhere with a fifth-year Ravenclaw so he was out. James wasn't going to interrupt that.

So he vowed to find Remus and though it took the better part of an hour, he finally located him in one of the Herbology greenhouses. He was tucked behind an overgrown plant, his shoulders hunched and his fingers fiddling around like he was pretending to tend to something. James could only tell that he was pretending because loud, heaving sobs were tearing out of his throat, so loud they echoed off the glass walls and ceiling.

"Remus?" James said tentatively. Remus jumped violently, shoving away from the planter in front of him and running straight into the one behind him. His face was one of mortification, tears still openly streaming down his cheeks. "What's wrong?"

"How did you find me?" Remus asked rather than answering.

"Erm, I just... looked for you," James said awkwardly. "Why are you crying in the greenhouse?"

Angry defiance flashed across Remus's face for a second but it was gone just as fast, falling away into something pathetic and unhappy. "I'm not," he mumbled nonsensically, wiping furiously at his cheeks.

"Oh, okay," James said because they both knew Remus was lying, the proof was right in front of them, but he didn't mind if his friends had to lie first before they could tell the truth.

"Why were you looking for me?"

"Well, because Peter is in detention — honestly, we need to get him a new watch for his birthday or something, this is getting ridiculous — and Sirius is off with that Ravenclaw fifth year. I forget what her name is." James was rambling a bit, but he didn't miss the way Remus's shoulders fell when he mentioned Sirius.

"Right," Remus said, "so I'm the last option."

James gasped, stung like Remus had purposefully hurt him. "How dare you?"

Remus raised his eyebrows, but he didn't take it back. He looked a little peeved, but mostly he just looked sad, and James was never good with sadness. When he was a little kid, he was overly empathetic, crying at every little thing. If someone was sad in a book he was reading, it would ruin his whole day. He'd buried that side of himself or worked to bury it, but it still came out when related to the people he cared about.

"I'm sorry if my wanting to spend time with you is such a problem," James snapped angrily. Remus looked mildly surprised, but he didn't say anything. James made a growling noise, a little pit of frustration in his stomach. "You're my friend, stop being a knob."

That startled a laugh out of Remus, loosening the feeling in James's chest. When the moment passed, something thick like grief filled the air. Remus frowned.

"Why are you hiding in the greenhouses?" James asked, this time giving him his most piercing stare. Sirius always found that stare impossible to lie to, James could only hope that Remus felt the same way.

Remus's shoulders dropped, defeat on his face. "It's just this time of the moon cycle. It makes me... emotional." His cheeks were burning red, embarrassment making him fidget.

"Oh," James said. "Well, that makes sense. Why didn't you just say that?"

Remus shrugged. James watched him searchingly for a moment.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

Remus let out an unhappy laugh. "I don't mind if you stay, but you've been warned."

"Okay," James said cheerfully. "Want to sneak into the kitchens?"

Remus smiled softly. "Sure," he said.

It wasn't until later that day that James got the real reason that Remus was crying like that. It wasn't even on purpose. James had forgotten to ask, or he was just too nervous about making his usually stoic friend cry to try posing the question, so when he mentioned Sirius and the adventure he was on that afternoon and he watched as Remus's entire face crumbled, not for the first time that day, James finally understood.

Remus didn't start crying again, but James was sure he saw his eyes get a bit watery before he made a quick excuse and hurried out of the kitchens. James gave him a few seconds head start before following him and by the time he caught up to Remus coming out of a bathroom stall a floor up, Remus had all but buried his sadness.

Remus gave him a wary look when he realized he'd been followed, but he also didn't look surprised, like he knew that James would have no choice but to do so. James chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, torn about what he should do, before he finally said, "We don't have to talk about it."

"Okay," Remus said uneasily. He didn't look like he believed that offer. James was true to his word though, he didn't bring it up, but he did make an effort to find Remus during that time of the moon cycle, doing his best to distract him. Especially when Sirius was off with someone.

James couldn't even explain how happy he was that those days were over. Remus being miserable over Sirius while Sirius acted like nothing could touch him was too painful to witness. Peter thought they were both idiots, which James, unfortunately, agreed with, but it wasn't like he could tell them that. In those days, he had no idea how Sirius felt about Remus and even when he finally figured it out, he still had to let them navigate that themselves. At least, that's what his mother told him when he confided in her about it.

He was a bit more forceful now that they were adults though. While he would have never sent them off on a dangerous mission together when they were teenagers, it was fair game nowadays. And besides, he thought, it had worked out perfectly. They were together, they were engaged, they were happy.

For the most part.

Remus still had his weepy days, and James still kind of loved them. It wasn't that he wanted to watch his friend cry, it was just that Remus was so much softer during those days. James couldn't help it, he found it endearing. He felt guilty about feeling that way though. Especially because Remus in that state thoroughly unsettled Sirius.

"You lived with him for years," James said one morning after Sirius had climbed into his bed to share a distressing story about watching Remus cry the night before while reading a letter from Harry. "What did you do before when he got like this?"

Sirius's eyebrows furrowed deeply. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

James scrunched up his face in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

“Remus never cried over letters before. He barely cried at all. I didn’t even know he could cry. I mean, there was that one time when I had his legs behind his ears and I was—”

“Please, spare me,” James said quickly, hurrying to move on from that image. Remus was too regal to imagine like that, at least for James. “So you’re saying that he never cried even right before the new moon?”

“What does the new moon have to do with anything?”

“Sirius, honestly, you cannot be this oblivious.”

Sirius looked offended, sitting up like he was about to start fist-fighting with James.

“There is no way you don’t know about the moon cycle and the way it affects Remus,” James said forcefully. Even if it got him punched, he couldn’t very well allow Remus to marry a man who knew so little about him.

To his surprise, Sirius relaxed slightly. “Of course, I know about that: hot on the way to the full, cold on the way out, wolfy when the moon’s too bright, overly engaged in ‘To Do Lists’ right after the new moon. I’m not an idiot.”

“Good,” James said, nodding with pride before remembering the original topic of their conversation. “So wait, what do you think happens before the new moon?”

Sirius looked confused again, but he wasn’t staring at James, his eyes had grown distant, staring off in a haze. “Remus said something about that,” he said faintly.

“What was that?”

“He said...” Sirius frowned before his eyes lit up slightly, the memory finally clicking into place — that happened to him a lot, James thought it was because of the dementors. “He said that he was too sensitive to smells and sounds. That’s what he told me in seventh year. That’s why he always disappears.”

“He said that?” James asked.

“Yeah,” Sirius said, nodding once. “Wait, did he tell you about that? Do you think that’s why he was crying?”

“Honestly,” James grumbled, “you’d think a man his age would learn how to be truthful.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

James wanted to stomp down the hall to Sirius and Remus’s room where he would no doubt find an overly sad Remus and demand that he tell Sirius everything, but James had done enough meddling and Regulus would be disappointed if he found out about it. Or he assumed Regulus would be disappointed. That or he would feel embarrassed for James and that was far worse.

“You’ll have to ask him,” James snapped, crossing his arms over his chest and turning on his side so his back was to Sirius. He expected some arguing, but Sirius remained silent, only the distant sounds of his even breaths filled space before he eventually climbed off the bed and left the room, his socked feet nearly soundless against the hardwood floor.

“I can’t believe he never told me,” Sirius said later that evening when he and James were having dinner together. Remus was already asleep, worn out by something Sirius had done to him, something James didn’t want to know about. “I mean, what did he think I was going to do? Laugh at him?”

James quirked one eyebrow. “Did you laugh at him?”

Sirius pursed his lips to the side. “Well, yeah, but only a bit.” James raised both of his eyebrows this time. “For less than five minutes!” Sirius defended. “It wasn’t that bad — no, don’t look at me like that — it really wasn’t. It wasn’t like I was going to hold this over his head.”

“Do you think you would have in seventh year?” James asked. He immediately regretted the words, wishing he could stuff them back into his mouth and obliterate Sirius ever hearing them, especially when he saw the way Sirius’s face fell, something hollow and horror-filled replacing his earlier elation. “I’m sorry,” James said quickly.

Sirius blinked twice. “No, it is quite all right. If you will excuse me, I need to attend to something.”

That was another weird thing that Sirius did now, something he hadn’t done since those first few weeks at Hogwarts. Anytime he had bad days or just bad moments, he would start talking with that clipped, formal voice like the trained pureblood scion that he was. It scared James to see Sirius like that. It felt like he was possessed.

It also reminded him a bit of Regulus who had never quite shed that formality and that always made James’s chest ache.

He didn’t see Sirius or Remus again for two days after that. He was a bit worried about them that next morning, but when he’d made the poor decision to check their room — he just wanted to make sure they weren’t fighting — he was thoroughly traumatized by the noises he’d heard spilling out from under the door.

He was happy for them, and only a little annoyed that he was left alone again for several days after he just got his friends back. It wasn’t their fault and he didn’t blame them, but James was not used to being alone. Even growing up as an only child, he wasn’t ever really alone, spending time with friends and his parents most days, but now he had far too much time on his hands.

It didn’t help that Tonks had stopped coming over after her fight with Remus, and James didn’t know how to safely contact her to ask her if they were still friends. He supposed that he could ask Sirius or Remus to help him, maybe he could just owl her without signing his name, but it all felt wrong and he didn’t want to accidentally put her in danger.

He wrote to Regulus a lot during those days, sometimes twice a day. There was always a pit in his stomach when he sent off each letter though, a worry like each one would the letter Regulus didn't respond to.

That worry never came to fruition though, because Regulus responded to all of them, even the ones that were mostly just James rambling. Plus, he always added his own updates, including all the details of the angst happening at Hogwarts. His letter about Harry and Draco's fight in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom was a real treat. James laughed until tears were coming out of his eyes because even with everything going on with Harry, the fact that he had apparently been caught kissing Draco Malfoy by Regulus and Snape was funnier than anything James could have imagined.

Regulus wrote only a few hours after that letter arrived, informing him that he'd finally told Harry about the Horcrux, though not in so many words, and that Harry knew James had been told about the "Draco Incident" but that he should probably not bring it up, just to spare Harry's feelings.

James wouldn't bring it up, not until they were face to face at least.

Honestly, his son being caught kissing the Slytherin boy he hated so much that he had to talk about him constantly wasn't surprising. James couldn't help but imagine how Lily would react to this information. She'd probably be a lot more sensitive to Harry's feelings. James was doing his best to mentally imitate what her response might be, but it was hard to think through his mirth.

With Remus and Sirius too heavily entangled to spend time with James most days and with Tonks in the wind, James went back to spending most of his free time working on the portkeys and the new wards. He'd all but finished the wards he could complete on his own. It wasn't easy, the work so taxing that sometimes he couldn't even cast a *leviosa* afterward, but he'd managed to finish it.

He would have to complete the last set with Sirius and Regulus together.

The portkeys were coming along nicely as well, despite how rocky the research had been to start. He hadn't shared it with anyone, but he'd been very worried that he wouldn't have been able to figure it out at first. Portkey creation required a very specific array of talents in subjects that James was only passably good at. He was good at Charms, but Arithmancy for the calculations and Runes for integrating that kind of magic with an object were incredibly difficult for him.

He'd never felt so dumb, but he'd figured it out. At least, he was pretty sure he had. He hadn't tested them yet, not beyond the two he made to take him to the Black family property he was working on, and he'd only been willing to use them while already on the property, letting that horrible squeezing and dizzying feeling drag him from one side of the house to the other.

He didn't trust his calculations enough yet to try taking a portkey out of Grimmauld's wards. That was a bit too intimidating to start.

Plus it didn't help that Regulus was very forceful about him not trying any of the portkeys — he didn't know about the two that James had already tested — because he was terrified that the Ministry would be able to track it and someone would show up right as James was landing or, Godric forbid, pluck him out of the air and drag him to the Ministry holding cells. James didn't want that to happen either, the memories of the Department of Mysteries still haunting his days and nights, but he was pretty sure that the magic Regulus was imagining could only exist for underage wizards and at a far less sophisticated level.

James didn't tell him that though. He valued his conversations with Regulus and he wasn't about to sacrifice them to the need to tell Regulus he was wrong or worrying for nothing. He decided to just be happy that Regulus was worried about him at all.

While James was busy working, recalculating, and recasting wards, Sirius seemed to be getting deeper and deeper into his preparation for the ritual with Harry. It grew less difficult each time, Sirius said when he tore himself away from Remus long enough to tell James, but that didn't mean that it was easy, not by a long shot.

The ritual was meant to drag his soul away from his body. James wasn't surprised that it was difficult.

However, Sirius was curiously tightlipped about the effects of the ritual, both after the fact and during. James had tried to ask what Sirius saw while going through it, but Sirius never mentioned anything specific, often changing the subject before they could get too deep into it. James tried not to feel left out by that, but it wasn't always easy. Especially considering Remus got to do the ritual with Sirius — it had to be done with two people, Sirius said — which meant that Remus knew what it was like and was also not telling James.

James often wondered if Regulus knew the details. He was too afraid to ask, he didn't want to be hurt by the answer. He was starting to feel a bit caged in, not as much as he'd felt in the Department of Mysteries, when he'd actually been caged, but he felt like a little kid who had to wait till an adult was around before he could do anything.

He tried not to let it get to him too much, but the feeling of being cooped up for so long was starting to grate on him a bit. He was still pondering what to do about that feeling when another letter came from Regulus, tied to Nyx's delicate ankle. James opened it quickly, his chest already loosening at the sight of Regulus's elegant scrawl.

James,

I can't believe I'm going to say this, but given the way things have improved with Harry, I think it's a good idea. However, there will be rules. A lot of rules. And if you want to come you will have to follow all of them, no matter what. Okay? You can't decide halfway through that you know better. Surely you understand what kind of danger we're in.

Then again, maybe this isn't such a good idea. Sirius and Remus both think it's a good idea, but what do they know?

James's fingers gripped the letter so tightly that it was nearly ripping in half. Watching Regulus argue with himself while also failing to mention what he was even speaking about

made James's heart skip a beat, though he couldn't pinpoint why.

I believe it's too late. Sirius will likely go over my head, and I might as well take this opportunity to tell you the rules. But I'm repeating this here: DO NOT COME IF YOU'RE GOING TO PUT YOURSELF IN DANGER.

Now, how would you feel about coming to Hogwarts to watch Harry's final Quidditch match of the season?

the memory.

Regulus knew it was getting late in the term, the final Quidditch game on the horizon, finals just beyond that, but he hadn't really considered it until it was almost mid-May. Since his conversation with Dumbledore and Snape, Regulus had gone back to avoiding the headmaster altogether. That conversation alone was more tiresome than he'd expected it to be, mostly because Regulus was hyper aware that he'd been avoiding Dumbledore, and Dumbledore was hyper aware that Regulus wasn't looking him in the eye.

He didn't have the room to understand how he felt about Dumbledore, though he had to admit he was oddly grateful that he agreed to help Draco. It turned out that Dumbledore had known from the summer before sixth year that Draco had been given the task of killing him, though he seemed totally unfazed by that information.

"It was always unlikely that Mr. Malfoy would have the stomach for such a task," Dumbledore chirped, as casually as if they were discussing his latest purchases at Honeydukes rather than an assassination plot against his life.

"And if he had? If he'd been more ambitious?"

Dumbledore tilted his head, Regulus was staring at his purple cloak-covered shoulder.

"What would you have done to Draco?"

Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully. "I supposed it depends on how successful he was at the attempt, but Mr. Malfoy is only my responsibility in so far as he allows himself to be."

"He's your student."

"As were you, but I had to allow you and Mr. Malfoy to make your own decisions."

"So, you were planning not to intervene, even though you knew he was planning these attempts on your life, even though other people were getting hurt in the meantime?"

"I believed my lack of punishment over his misguided attempts against me was a kindness. I would have expected you to agree given your handling of Madam Rosmerta."

Regulus tensed, every muscle in his body locking up like he'd been hit with a hex. "What are you talking about?"

Dumbledore was quiet for a beat. "I could not reach out to Mr. Malfoy with what I know without putting Professor Snape in danger. Had Mr. Malfoy come to me from the beginning, or at any time, I would have gladly offered to help him."

Regulus felt irritated by this, but he had trouble parsing through where his feelings were coming from. There was an immediate surge of impotent helplessness that made the entire situation feel beyond frustrating, but he could tell in an instant that it was more complicated

than his emotions wanted it to be. He supposed he had such a strong reaction to Dumbledore's words because they were so oddly similar to some of his own thoughts, especially during his first life. The choice to let people fall where they may, to let them make their own decisions, was an easy one. He wasn't responsible for anyone else then.

He'd spent his childhood digging his nails into anything he could lose, but when the ground broke beneath him, he gave up trying to protect anyone, especially himself. Things were different now. Now that he felt responsible for so many, he worried that he may have swung to the opposite end of that spectrum.

He'd intervened in every place he felt like he could, he'd strong-armed Draco into allowing Regulus to help him more than once, even as Draco seemed flighty, even as he tried to get away. He struggled to know which choice was the right one, and he struggled to walk the line between those two extremes.

He cared about Draco, just as he cared for so many others, but was he wrong to force him to make the choices Regulus believed were correct? Was Dumbledore right to pull back and allow Draco to come to him only when, or if, he was ready?

Dumbledore had alternative motives though. He wasn't just here to keep a handful of random students safe. He intended to win the war, to kill Voldemort, and though Regulus used to consider that the most important thing, he now believed himself to be occupying a liminal space between good and evil.

Dumbledore fought for the greater good, but Regulus had no interest in that, not if Harry died. He thought that perhaps that made him evil, it certainly made him selfish. Everyday Voldemort continued to take the lives of wizards and muggles alike and Regulus still chose Harry over all of them. He supposed it was easier coming from a place of making all the wrong choices. He'd been a Death Eater, he still was, if the mark on his arm was any indicator. He'd sacrificed the only love he'd ever felt just so he could live up to the impossible expectations of his family.

And not once did he feel guilt over it.

He felt loneliness and grief over losing James, but he didn't feel guilty for following Voldemort. He made excuses for himself, and where he couldn't make excuses, he disregarded any feelings that rose. In a strange way, he felt that he was doing the same thing now, making excuses for his desire to protect one boy over the rest of the wizarding world.

So how did that make him different from Dumbledore who made choices and sacrifices in the name of his own excuse, his own desire to see Voldemort well and truly gone from the world?

It all made his head hurt, and though he could hear mistrust in other people's voices when they spoke of Dumbledore — that was common even before the first wizarding war — he could also hear all the praise the strange man incurred. A hero and a villain, in equal measure, and yet, to Regulus, he seemed just an old man making the choices he had available to him.

Regulus rubbed his forehead unhappily.

“Draco is never going to ask you,” he said rather than dwelling anymore on the concepts of good and evil. He wasn’t the right person to make the distinction anyway. He would have to ask someone with a stronger moral compass — James or that weird little house elf that used to work for the Malfoys.

“Do you believe that’s true?” Dumbledore asked. Snape stood in the room with him, but he’d been disturbingly silent through the entire exchange. Regulus had almost forgotten that he was there, just a distant shadow blending into the wall.

“Yes. With his parents’ lives on the line, Draco is never going to actively make a choice that he thinks will get them hurt or killed.”

“I see.”

“But I’m asking,” Regulus said, as confidently as he could manage. “I’m asking you to help him. This is far too much responsibility for a boy like him.”

Dumbledore stared at him for a second, Regulus could feel his searching gaze. “Very well. Severus, do you have any thoughts?”

Snape twitched once, his black cloak swirling around him for a moment making him look like a storm brewing on the Black Lake. “There is only one way for Draco’s parents to escape death, though I fear punishment will be expected either way.”

“Draco doesn’t need to know that,” Regulus said automatically. He didn’t miss the measured looks they both gave him, and he could feel hypocrisy settling around his shoulders as easily as Harry’s invisibility cloak. If anyone was going to wear it, it might as well be him. “How can they escape death?”

“Draco is not allowed to fail by choice, the Dark Lord has already said that his mother and father will pay the price if he does, but if he fails due to his own skill, perhaps at the cost of his own life, the Dark Lord would likely spare Lucius and Narcissa. If only because Draco has already been enough of an example for the rest of us.”

Regulus tried to digest that idea, but his thoughts kept getting caught on the words *cost of his own life*.

“I agree,” Dumbledore said. He sounded solemn for the first time that night, a seriousness dripping down the walls around them, souring the already unhappy mood. “What is his other task?”

For a moment, Regulus considered not telling Dumbledore what he knew, but he’d already made the choice to trust the man, for good or bad, so he couldn’t find an argument to get out of giving him this piece of information as well. “He’s supposed to repair the vanishing cabinet in the Room of Hidden Things.”

“Ah,” Dumbledore said, sounding genuinely surprised. “That’s brilliant. I assume it has a sister.”

“In Borgin and Burkes,” Regulus replied.

“Has he managed it?”

Regulus took a deep breath, trying to release the snake of stress that had wound around his lungs. “Not yet. I—I made him stop working on it, I promised that I would take over. I’ve been making just enough progress, so Draco has something to report. I could destroy it at any time.”

“I don’t believe that’s necessary,” Dumbledore said. Regulus looked at him curiously, but he could see the powerful glint in his eye, a plan forming behind those brilliant eyes.

Regulus had been dead tired after that exchange, but they all had a way forward, and though he still had to talk to Draco about it, he wasn’t as worried. There were still risks — a lot of risks — but he had hope. All Draco knew was that they were supposed to proceed as usual, that there should be no changes to his behavior. He clearly had questions about what his kiss with Harry had to do with anything, but he had enough decorum to keep that to himself for now.

Regulus couldn’t even really explain it himself, perhaps it was just the way he’d watched the two of them obsess over each other for so many years that made him feel like that moment of connection was enough to push Draco into allowing Regulus to help him completely, rather than keeping him at arm’s length.

Strangely, he didn’t have strong feelings about seeing the two of them kiss. He supposed he just had bigger things to worry about than two teenage boys fighting before kissing a bit. He’d been a teenager once. He understood. He did write to James though, he couldn’t help himself. He hadn’t had anything this interesting to tell him in weeks and he knew he would get a kick out of it.

Though he would never actually do it, he did get the strange desire to thank Draco for what happened between him and Harry, because it led to Harry finally speaking to him, opening up to him in a wild array of emotions, coming and going in a blink of an eye. Regulus was happy to hear every single one, he’d listen to anything Harry had to say if it meant he was talking to him.

A handful of days after the moment in the bathroom, Regulus was starting to get anxious. He still hadn’t talked to Draco. He’d asked Snape if he was planning to discuss the plan with him, but Snape just shrugged and waved him off, ever the cantankerous bastard, even if he was supposed to be helping. Regulus resigned to do it himself, but it was difficult with Draco going back to avoiding him. Regulus didn’t fully understand why, but if he had to guess, he would say that it was embarrassment.

Draco had spent years parading himself around Hogwarts pretending to be the perfect son, and now so much of his identity had been taken from him. Then on top of that, he’d let that poorly crafted persona shatter when he and Harry had kissed. Gone was the boy pretending that Harry was his biggest enemy, only to express constant worry over him in private. If Harry was more observant, he would be able to see through that now. That was most likely what worried Draco the most.

Luckily for him, Harry wasn't the most observant boy out there. He could pick up on things, he wasn't totally oblivious, but at the same time, Regulus was almost certain that Harry was too busy burying his head in the sand to notice anything going on with Draco.

There was a part of Regulus that just wanted to explain that to Draco, to put his mind at ease, but he couldn't betray the few things he knew about Harry's feelings, that would be a betrayal. Not that it mattered though because he couldn't find a time to get Draco alone at all. He needed to explain to him what would happen, he needed to make sure that Draco understood what they were all doing to keep him safe.

It was frustrating, but there was a small part of him that was oddly relieved. He knew that Draco wouldn't be happy when he realized that his parents would be left with very little explanation in the claws of the Dark Lord, and Regulus didn't look forward to trying to explain to him that it was the best option for all of them.

There was no way to get Lucius and Narcissa out of Malfoy Manor safely, not without them being in on it, and they just couldn't trust them. Lucius had been a close follower of the Dark Lord for decades and there was no evidence that he had ever truly wavered in his support of the man. Narcissa would likely follow anything her husband decided, as was common for women of his family. Even with Draco's life and soul on the line, Narcissa still wouldn't leave.

The only option now was to hopefully keep them alive, and Regulus could only hope that Draco would understand that and that he wouldn't do anything rash when he found out about it. Regulus might have to do some borderline illegal magic to keep Draco from trying to leave the school.

Every time he thought about it, about everything that could go wrong, he felt his chest constrict a little tighter. At this point, he was going to start getting gray hairs with the amount of stress he was shouldering.

Still, the only thing he could think about was everything that could go wrong. They were all walking a tight line now, one wrong step, one secret that shouldn't be shared getting out, and it would all come crashing down. He tried not to dwell on it, but it wasn't easy. All he needed was a little bit of luck.

Regulus looked up from the book he was half-reading. He was sitting in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room in an oversized chair. The firelight was casting shadows over the faces of Ron, Harry, and Hermione who were deep in a conversation about something on the couch next to him. He hadn't been listening much recently, but he enjoyed being in their presence.

Ron's eyebrows were furrowed so deeply that the line between them looked nearly permanent. He'd been acting odd since the day with Harry and Draco in the bathroom. Regulus couldn't put his finger on it, but it was obvious to him that something was going on with him.

It reminded him a bit of the first Quidditch game of the year when Ron had been so nervous that he'd tried repeatedly to quit the team. It was a harrowing time. He'd grown to feel more

confident in his playing ability, but there was still stress there. Their running joke now, when things got to be a bit much, was that Ron just needed to *feel lucky* to play well, a clear reference to when Harry pretended to put Felix Felicis in Ron's goblet before the game to trick him into feeling confidence. It always made Regulus laugh, but now, it pulled at something in his mind, something he'd been putting off for a long while.

"Harry," he called. All three of them looked up at him, Harry looked curious, Ron looked oddly relaxed, and Hermione looked flushed like she'd been in the middle of an argument. "Do you still have that bottle of Felix Felicis?"

Harry's eyebrows furrowed. "Yeah, it's in my trunk upstairs. Do you want it?"

Regulus shook his head. "No, I have an idea."

In all honesty, it was a bit stupid that it hadn't occurred to him earlier. They'd been sitting on a gold mine for months, the perfect thing to solve the problem of obtaining Slughorn's memory, and not once had it occurred to Regulus. He felt a bit dumb looking back, but there wasn't anything to do now.

Harry was immediately intrigued by the plan. Regulus couldn't be sure if Harry was still thinking about what Dumbledore had asked from him, about the memory, but when Regulus brought it up, Harry was quick to agree to do it.

"Just be careful," Regulus said, only an hour later. Felix Felicis didn't require much planning. Regulus had never taken it, but he read about it before and he knew that the moment Harry drank some of it, Felix would decide what he needed to do. There wasn't much they could do to prepare him for that.

Hermione found that infuriating if the way she kept trying to give Harry instructions was any indicator, but Ron remained quiet throughout the entire conversation. He could feel Ron's eyes on him, like he was carefully inspecting him, like he was watching for something.

"Come back as soon as you have it, okay?"

"All right," Harry said with a quick nod. "How much should I drink?"

"Just a tiny sip. It can last up to twelve hours if you drink too much, and it could make you sick under the wrong circumstances."

"Okay," Harry said, then very carefully tipped the vial back to take a very small dose of the clear potion. The effect on him was immediate, his shoulders loosening and relaxing into a confidence that Harry had never worn. He grinned brightly, his eyes scrunching up behind his glasses.

"Remember, you have to get the memory!" Hermione said immediately. She seemed jittery, as if Harry drinking this potion was going to lead to something terrible.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I think I'm going to go pay Hagrid a visit."

“No, Harry—”

“It’s okay, Hermione. Let him go,” Regulus said quietly. Harry laughed, though none of them had made a joke, then threw a wave over his shoulder and sauntered out of the common room. Regulus just shook his head exasperatedly.

“Weird seeing him like that,” Ron said, crossing his arms lazily over his chest.

“He looked so relaxed,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

He looked like James, Regulus thought but didn't say. “It might be a while before he’s back.”

“We should go back to studying,” Hermione said.

Ron groaned, but it was playful. Hermione smacked him against his chest, a soft smile on her lips. Regulus followed Hermione and Ron back down to the common room, but he couldn’t focus on anything. He felt like he was just waiting, drifting, his mind starting and aborting thoughts rapidly, one after the other.

It took more than four hours for Harry to come back. Hermione and Ron had already gone to bed, it was clear they were both worried too, but Regulus could see Harry on the map down at Hagrid’s hut, Slughorn’s name floating next to him, so he was relatively sure that it would all be okay eventually. He sent them off to bed with what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

He tracked Harry on the map as he finally left Hagrid’s hut, leaving Hagrid and Slughorn behind. He was nearly to the Gryffindor Common Room, only a few corridors away, when another name intervened. The two of them collided, Harry’s name shuffling to the side so rapidly that he must have been pushed. That was the only thing that made sense, especially when he noticed the other name.

Draco Malfoy.

Regulus rolled his eyes so hard that it hurt. He couldn't see what they were doing on the map, but their names were oddly close together, and it was too late for this kind of shenanigan. He pulled himself out of the chair with a groan, his back aching for how stiffly he’d been sitting. He walked toward the portrait hole, the map still open in front of him, and caught the moment that Draco’s name started moving, rushing away from Harry’s.

Harry didn’t move, not for a long moment. Regulus stood frozen watching his name and was just resigning himself to going to find him when Harry slowly started toward the common room. Regulus sat back down, trying to look as unbothered as he could. He was dead curious about what had just happened between Draco and Harry, but he would never ask.

Harry clearly had enough feelings about it with Regulus trying to poke his nose in.

He tucked the map away just as Harry came into the common room. He looked tired, but his eyes were bright and wide.

“You’re still up?” Harry asked.

“I was waiting for you,” Regulus answered.

“Sorry, I just got held up—” He cut himself off just as his face flashed bright red. Regulus pretended not to notice.

“Did you do it then?” Regulus asked.

Harry’s eyes widened even further. “What?” he breathed.

Regulus bit the inside of his cheek. “Did you get the memory?”

“Oh,” Harry said, blinking a few times. “Yes. Yeah, I got it.” He reached into his jacket pocket, fumbling slightly before grasping onto a small vial. He handed it to Regulus carefully. “He seemed pretty upset giving it to me. What do you think it’ll show?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Regulus said with a quiet sigh. “I can only hope it holds some answers.” He looked away from the memory swirling around in the delicate piece of glass, his eyes locking back on Harry’s. “I’m going to go see Dumbledore.”

“Right now?”

“Yes,” Regulus said, standing before he even realized he was going to. He had to see what was in the memory, he had to know. “You should get some sleep. Coming off of Felix is supposed to be uncomfortable.”

Harry frowned slightly, but ultimately agreed, walking up the dorm stairs in a daze. Regulus checked the map one more time before leaving the common room. It was late enough that the hallways were empty. He spotted Draco’s name down in the Slytherin common room, Theodore Nott’s name right next to him.

He slipped the map into his pocket and started toward the Headmaster’s office. He still felt unsettled by Dumbledore, he suspected that he always would, but this memory was more important than his foolish fears. He had to know what Slughorn had said to the Dark Lord all those years ago.

He didn’t check to see if Dumbledore was awake or in his office, but it didn’t matter. When he approached the statue, it jumped aside before he could say a single word, as if he was expected. He rushed up the stairs, rapping quickly on the door before swinging it open, not even waiting for a response.

Dumbledore was standing by the pensieve, the lights jumping across his shadowed face as he stared down in consternation. He looked up when Regulus entered.

“Mr. Black,” he greeted mildly.

“I’ve got the memory,” Regulus said triumphantly. Dumbledore looked confused for a split second before his face opened in understanding.

He took a small half step backward then gestured toward the pensieve. Regulus didn’t need any more than that. He strode forward and uncorked the vial, dumping the memory into the

pensieve a moment later. He could see a flash of the Dark Lord's young face, only for a second, but it was enough to make him pause.

"Shall we?" Dumbledore asked.

Regulus drew in a sharp breath between his teeth. "Yes." The two of them moved together as one, bending at the waist and dropping their faces into the pensieve.

Regulus had seen young Tom Riddle before, he'd been shown the other memories Dumbledore had, but it was still shocking to see him. He was handsome, devastatingly so. Regulus likely would have been intrigued by him had they been at school together. The thought made him feel ill.

Tom Riddle's eyes glittered darkly as he talked to Slughorn, the old fool so caught up in his own ego that he couldn't see that he was being played. Tom Riddle hadn't looked like this when Regulus had known him, but he'd still been handsome. Regulus could remember how much his legs shook when he kneeled before him to take the mark, the darkness drifting off of him in waves.

It had made him sick then, but there was power there too, an intoxicating power that couldn't be explained. He could imagine what it would be like to be in Tom Riddle's presence when he was young and driven, the way he would be able to bend people to his will. If Regulus hadn't been so disposable during his first life, he could only imagine what Tom would have done to him, would have made him do.

He was shaking so badly by that point that he nearly missed the question Tom Riddle had asked about Horcruxes. It was Dumbledore's voice that brought him back.

"Seven," he said faintly, true shock and horror in his voice.

They pulled out of the memory a moment later, the truth of what was said all those years ago settling over both of them. Dumbledore, for the first time that Regulus had seen, stumbled slightly, walking unsteadily to the stairs in his office and settling down to sit on one of the steps. His head was hanging in his hands, one of them blackened by a curse.

"How did he even survive?" Regulus wondered aloud.

"He didn't," Dumbledore said. "The Tom Riddle that exists now is nothing like the one in that memory. He's been warped by dark magic."

Regulus felt dizzy, the world moving around him. He tried to remember that this was a good thing, that he had a final number, that he had something to work toward, but all he could think of was that that beautiful boy, now a horrifying man, was after Harry. He would do anything to destroy him.

"We have to kill him," Regulus said. Dumbledore didn't respond, which Regulus was grateful for because it seemed a bit asinine to think that now.

"If any of them remain, he'll be able to come back."

“Not without followers,” Regulus said.

Dumbledore looked up at him finally, his eyes piercing, disturbingly so. Regulus felt like he was being dissected.

“And you plan to kill all of them?” Dumbledore asked. There wasn’t judgment in his voice, but there was still a challenge.

“What do you mean?”

“How would you keep his followers from flocking to him? You cannot destroy them all.”

I can try, Regulus thought. Dumbledore frowned as if he had heard him.

“It’s a terrible thing — killing another person.”

Regulus clenched his teeth. “I know.”

“Do you?” Dumbledore asked with mild curiosity. He stood suddenly, walking smoothly over toward the pensieve. “You’ve seen what Tom has become, how the destruction of his soul has turned him into a monster.”

“You don’t believe he was always a monster?”

“No,” Dumbledore said. “I believe he chose to become one.”

Something in Regulus’s chest fractured, something he didn’t even know could break.

“The path you plan to follow, it will take everything from you.”

Regulus felt like he’d been burned, like he’d touched something so hot that it felt cold at first. “You’re not a seer,” Regulus said immaturely.

“No, I am not, but I have seen enough children make bad choices.”

“I made bad choices last time,” Regulus corrected. “I don’t intend to remake them.”

Dumbledore turned to look at him, something like disappointment on his face. “You plan to do everything in your power to keep Harry from killing Tom.”

Regulus flinched. “I’ve never said that.”

“You did not have to,” Dumbledore said. “Your love for the boy is obvious.”

“I’m not going to turn him into a murderer, not even to kill the Dark Lord. There will be another way. I’ll make sure of it,” he growled, his fingers clenching into fists, digging harshly into palms.

“You may not have a choice,” Dumbledore said evenly.

“I know what I have to do to kill him this time. I know how to defeat him this time.”

“And if you are not able to?”

Regulus paused for a moment, his throat tightening dangerously. “You think he’ll kill me,” Regulus realized, his voice oddly devoid of emotion.

“I do,” Dumbledore said without apology, firm truth in his eyes.

Regulus took a step back. There was no reason that the words from Dumbledore should hurt him, yet he felt like he’d been scolded, like the rug had been pulled out from under him.

“There is no guarantee he wouldn’t kill Harry too,” Regulus said darkly, his worst fears bubbling up inside him, mixing and clashing, forming into something devastating. He wanted to talk to Sirius, a childish urge to sprint to his older brother, to demand to be comforted.

“Harry has a chance.”

Regulus’s nose burned like he was going to break down in tears. Dumbledore was being gentle, but his words were harsh. Regulus refused to listen to them, he refused to let Harry become something horrible, he couldn’t let that happen to him. He’d done so much to protect him. He took one menacing step forward before speaking through clenched teeth.

“I will *never* allow the two of them to meet. Tom Riddle will die before he ever lays his eyes on Harry again.”

the buck.

Chapter Notes

the first part of this chapter is smut. i don't know what came over me.

Sirius spent a lot of time dreaming as Padfoot nowadays. He wasn't sure why, it wasn't something he used to do that often, but since he and Remus had returned from their trip, he spent most nights running around the Forbidden Forest in his mind, his paws colliding with the ground as he bounded back and forth with Moony. It wasn't the worst way to spend his dreams, he'd definitely spent years experiencing nightmares to convince him of that, but it did make the waking process a bit odd.

That shifting moment between Padfoot's mind and his human mind always disoriented him a bit but experiencing that on top of waking up often left him feeling dazed for the first half hour of his day.

It was especially confusing on days like today when feelings of warmth and need started to filter through Padfoot's thoughts of run, play, hide.

He woke himself up with a groan. It forced its way from his throat like it had been building for hours. It had probably only been a few minutes, but it felt like so much more than that, like he'd never left this moment. He didn't open his eyes right away, instead, he let himself float in the very enticing feeling of a mouth wrapping around his length and swallowing him down.

He groaned again, his back arching off the bed, the sheets beneath him still chilly in the morning air. He gripped the bed with one hand, then blinked his eyes open, the bright light of the sun spilling in through the window blinding him for a second before he looked down and met those tempting and mischievous hazel eyes, the gold ring around his pupil like a dark promise of what was to come.

Remus hollowed his cheeks without warning and Sirius nearly shouted, his toes curling desperately, his body buzzing with the need for more, for everything.

"Oh, fuck. That feels so good," he said, his voice still scratchy from sleep. He wasn't sure how someone could smirk with a cock in their mouth, but somehow Remus always managed it. His eyes glittered before closing, his long lashes casting shadows on his handsome face. He swallowed around Sirius once more before pulling off with a filthy pop.

Sirius reached down instinctively and cupped Remus's face, pulling him up his body gently and kissing him. Every kiss with him was like a revelation, even after all this time it was like he'd never experienced something so nice, so comforting, and enthralling.

Remus, delightfully naked, threw one of his long legs over Sirius's prone form and settled backward, rubbing the crease of his arse against Sirius's straining cock. Sirius made a desperate noise, spreading his legs without thinking even though Remus was the one straddling him. He couldn't help it though, every part of him knew to open himself up for Remus, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Whatever Remus wanted.

Remus licked into Sirius's gasping mouth, his tongue hot like he was burning with a fever, his strong hands digging firmly into the bed on either side of Sirius's head. Sirius brushed his fingers through Remus's soft curls, relishing the fact that he got to have this.

Remus nibbled his bottom lip once, just enough to sting, then pulled back, looking down at Sirius with his well-kissed mouth glistening with spit. He looked debauched and so beautiful that Sirius was sure tears would spring to his eyes.

He'd grown sappy in his old age.

Remus grinned at him suddenly, that grin he used to wear years prior, when they were just boys planning pranks together. He knew what that grin meant, it meant that Remus just got an idea that he knew the others would love, that was a grin of triumph. Sirius used to dream of seeing the grin stretching over him.

Without preamble or warning, Remus pushed back onto Sirius's cock. He must have prepared himself before Sirius woke up, because he slid onto Sirius's cock with an ease they rarely encountered without days of nonstop shagging.

Sirius's mouth hung open dumbly, his fingers grasping at Remus's waist, gripping onto him as tightly as he could, afraid that he would fly away if he didn't have something to hold onto. Remus was so hot around him, his body welcoming Sirius in like he was meant to be there.

"Remus," Sirius whispered like a prayer. He'd barely spoken yet he felt like he was begging, like he was pleading for something.

"I know," Remus whispered back, his voice gliding over Sirius's mind like a spell meant to relieve pain. Nothing could penetrate through it, no dark thought about time lost or mistakes made. Remus quieted it all with a simple phrase.

Remus settled all the way down with a small hiss of air, throwing his head back as a moan crawled up his throat and spilled out into the room. Sirius couldn't look away from him, his long, lean body stretched out above him like a golden god. Every year that Remus had lived had just made him more attractive, the scars like decorations along his skin, his chest hair sparkling with sweat. Sirius pushed himself up slightly and licked a long stripe over Remus's nipple, desperate to taste him.

Remus moaned again then placed both of his hands against the headboard behind Sirius's head and started moving, pushing himself up, his thighs straining slightly, before dropping back down without mercy. The bed creaked as he did so, but Sirius could barely hear it, all he could think about was Remus around him, moving and shifting, riding him.

“Remus, oh, that’s—Remus,” Sirius babbled, Remus’s name spilling from his lips again and again. Remus stared back at him, barely blinking like he was trying to remember Sirius’s face, as he worked himself into a lather. Sirius glanced down to see Remus’s large cock red and leaking against his stomach.

Sirius licked his lips. “You’re so beautiful.”

Remus made a small sound, almost like a laugh. Sirius looked up sharply to find a small smirk on Remus’s lips.

“Don’t laugh,” Sirius said, though a grin was escaping him too. “You are. You’re perfect.”

“Am I?” Remus asked. Sirius thought that he was joking, but there was also a real question there. Sirius couldn’t stand it, the fact that Remus still didn’t know what a prize he was. There was something very wrong in the world if Remus didn’t know that.

“I spent twelve years dreaming of seeing you on top of me,” Sirius whispered. Remus’s eyebrows twitched, but his hips sped up, spurring Sirius on. “Not even sexually. I just imagined lying down and getting to look up at you, I imagined every time I thought the dementors weren’t near. I pictured it anytime I needed a moment of peace. You were like a mural painted on the ceiling of my cell, art just for me to enjoy, even though I didn’t deserve to. All I thought about was seeing you like this.”

He squeezed Remus a little tighter, his hips moving without his permission, meeting each of Remus’s movements.

“Sirius,” Remus breathed.

“You have no idea how you look,” Sirius said, “but there is a reason so many people are attracted to you. You’ve always said it was me, do you remember that? You used to say that I was the hot one?”

Remus shook his head, but Sirius could tell that he did, that he could recall that from their time as teenagers.

“It was never me. You’re the one people want to look at. I’m just lucky enough that you decided to look back.”

Remus made a low noise, grabbing Sirius by the back of the head and dragging him closer, pressing their lips together as Remus’s hole spasmed around him, his cock painting both of their chests. Sirius followed him a second later, the tightness pushing him over the edge. He couldn’t stop panting into Remus’s mouth even after he was finished, he was winded by Remus’s very presence.

He couldn’t be sure how much time they spent tangled together like that, but eventually, Remus pulled away, placing a few soft kisses across Sirius’s face before slowly climbing off of him.

“No, come back,” Sirius whined, refusing to let Remus go. Remus grinned at him.

“We have somewhere to be today, don’t you remember?”

“Not sure how I could remember anything with you waking me up like that.”

Remus rolled his eyes playfully. “My apologies, I’ll be sure never to do that again.”

Sirius stuck out his bottom lip in a pout. Remus grinned even wider, stretching forward and placing one last chaste kiss on Sirius’s lips before heading toward the bathroom, the shower turning on a moment later. Sirius flopped back on the bed with a contented sigh.

Remus wasn’t wrong, they did have somewhere to be today, and though Sirius was beyond excited about it, there was also a little warning of nervousness there too. He wasn’t completely sure where it was coming from, there was no reason that attending a Quidditch game with Remus and James should make him feel that chest-tightening anticipation, and yet it was there, unshakeable.

He climbed out of bed, hurrying to join Remus in the shower. He didn’t like to miss a moment of naked Remus if he didn’t have to. He picked up the half-dried flannel hanging on the bar attached to the wall and wet it quickly under the spray of water before rubbing it over Remus’s shoulders. Remus groaned quietly, glancing back at him. His eyebrows furrowed slightly.

“What’s eating you?”

Sirius blew out a huff of air. How did Remus always know?

“I don’t know,” he admitted. He rubbed the flannel into Remus’s lower back, massaging the muscles there as he leaned forward to put his chin on his shoulder. Remus hummed thoughtfully.

“Do you think we should include James in the ritual? You said you only needed to do it one or two more times.”

Sirius jolted slightly. He hadn’t been thinking about that, it wasn’t even on his mind, but now that Remus had said it, he realized that was exactly the problem. They’d been practicing the ritual for months at that point, always the two of them, and each time it was essentially the same. It was exhausting, magically and physically, but he always came back from it feeling a little more aligned, like each time he stretched his soul he was putting it back into place.

Lily wasn’t always there, but if she didn’t come, then no one else did. It would just be him and Remus wandering among the ether. But after Remus and Lily spoke, the guilt over James not knowing what they’d seen had started to eat at him.

He didn’t know how to tell James about seeing Lily at first, and now so much time had passed that he felt foolish for keeping it a secret. Remus, the gentle soul that he was, had just let Sirius decide how he wanted to approach it, but he wondered if Remus was disappointed in him for not telling. He was too afraid to ask.

Remus turned suddenly and wrapped his long arms around Sirius, dragging their naked chests together.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” Remus whispered.

“Is it though?”

“What do you mean?” Remus asked.

Sirius couldn’t look him in the eye. “Don’t you think it’s selfish for me not to ask James to join?”

“Well, it’s dangerous. Allowing anyone to participate in it puts them in danger.”

Sirius shrugged half-heartedly. “So, I’ve just been endangering you this whole time.”

“Yes,” Remus said, but he was chuckling. “But I signed up for that when I agreed to marry you.”

Sirius barked a laugh. “You agreed to marry me?” he asked loudly. “I’m pretty sure it was the other way around.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep telling yourself that,” Remus joked.

Sirius laughed, but the mirth faded quickly. “It seems so odd to me, knowing that they were going to separate, that James had this whole... *thing* with Reggie. It just seems too weird to bring him into a ritual to speak with his dead wife.”

Remus hummed again, brushing the damn ends of Sirius’s hair away from his face. “I think it’s more complicated than that.”

“I don’t know. It already seems pretty complicated.”

Remus smiled softly. “Well, then maybe it’s not complicated at all.”

“What do you mean?”

Remus placed a soft kiss on Sirius’s ear. “James and Lily were friends. It was more than just romantic. She knew about Regulus before either of us did. She meant something to James, even if it wasn’t as a wife.”

“So, you do think that he should be included in the ritual?” Sirius asked. He finally glanced up at his eyes, expecting to see judgment, but instead, he only found love.

“I think you’ll be mad at yourself if you don’t include him,” Remus said bluntly. Sirius bit his bottom lip harshly, but Remus reached out with the pad of his thumb and pulled the piece of flesh out from between his teeth. “You did always want to keep Lily all to yourself.”

Sirius laughed again. “Jealous?”

“Terribly,” Remus said, kissing him once. “When the two of you first became friends, I was out of my mind with jealousy. You can’t even imagine.”

Sirius gasped. He’d never known that. They never talked about that time in their friendship. Never. And though he wanted to know more — truly, he wanted to know everything — he wanted to kiss Remus more.

When they made it downstairs, breakfast was already made, and James was waiting in a thick Gryffindor sweater and a pair of black denim. The clothes looked expensive, excessively so for such a simple look.

“Where did you get the outfit?” Remus asked. James gave him a pleased smile.

“Regulus sent it to me,” James said happily.

Sirius froze for a second before shaking himself. “Reggie sent you clothes?” He glanced at Remus who looked just as surprised as Sirius felt.

James nodded. His smile was starting to look a bit smug for Sirius’s tastes.

“Why is he sending you clothes?” he asked, perhaps a bit sharply. Remus gave him a warning look. Sirius just shrugged.

“He said I needed to blend in,” James said, answering the question like he couldn’t hear the judgment in Sirius’s voice.

“That’s right. You’re supposed to be my cousin. Robert. We’ll do glamours after breakfast, then we should probably head out. Regulus is going to meet us at the gates. Harry doesn’t know we’re coming.”

“He’s going to be so surprised,” Sirius said. James smiled along, but that smile had dimmed just a bit. He had a worried line between his eyebrows. Sirius wanted to ask why he was worried, but then James was turning back to his food, making an effort to hide whatever he was feeling, and Sirius didn’t want to call it out.

James had been doing that more and more recently. It hadn’t escaped his notice. Things had been tense between them at first, especially before the trip, but they’d eased back into a friendship that felt like a missing limb. He was glad to have James back with him, but he couldn’t deny that James was different, more reserved, more secretive.

Sometimes he wondered if James was always like this, and he’d just never noticed. He’d managed to successfully keep his relationship with Regulus to himself for years. He tried not to dwell on it, especially today, but every now and then there was uncertainty there, forcing its way to the forefront of his mind.

They ate quickly before leaving, traveling via floo to the Hog’s Head Inn. Sirius waved at Aberforth as he passed by him. He grunted in response.

“He loves me,” Sirius mumbled.

“You wish,” Remus responded. James walked a bit behind them on the trek up to the school. He looked bizarre with the glamours settled over his features, his black hair replaced with sandy blonde curls, his glasses hidden by a spell, but there was still something undeniably *James* about the way he looked. Sirius couldn’t put his finger on it, but he could still see James through it all.

It was a remarkably nice day, even for May, the sun beating down on them pleasantly, the air cooled by a breeze every so often. Sirius sighed contentedly. He never thought he’d get the opportunity to return to Hogwarts, not on good terms, but now, with freedom unshackling the weight from his shoulders, and Remus’s fingers tangled with his, he felt like he was coming home.

The gates of Hogwarts came into view past a thick brush of trees and Sirius spotted Regulus immediately, but he wasn’t alone. Standing in front of him with McGonagall and none other than Severus Snape. No one knew who James really was, Regulus was very clear about that, no one could know. So why were Snivellus and McGonagall waiting for them?

“Good morning,” McGonagall greeted the moment the gates were opened. “Mr. Black told me that you would be attending today’s game.”

“Yes,” Remus said with a grin, he hadn’t dropped Sirius’s hand and Sirius couldn’t deny that he was warmed by that fact. “We wanted to see Harry play.”

McGonagall’s eyes glittered. “Yes, you are in for a treat. We are expected to win today.” She had a glint of competitiveness in her eyes. Snape frowned before pulling his wand.

“Who are you?” he said, looking past Sirius and Remus to where James was standing, only a step inside the gates. He’d been staring at McGonagall, his face drawn like he’d seen a ghost, but when his eyes flicked to Snape, he scowled. Sirius was relieved to finally have someone around who hated Snape as much as he did.

“I’m—”

“This is my cousin,” Remus interrupted, spotting the way this entire interaction was about to go south and stepping in before it could. He dropped Sirius’s hand to step next to James, then said, with a large, evil grin on his face, “His name’s Buck.” He slapped James hard on the back, James’s mouth dropped open.

“Buck?” Snape sneered. Regulus made a noise that sounded like a snort, but he started coughing to cover it up.

“It’s short for Robert,” James said helplessly. Sirius did his best not to laugh, he really did, but the noise left his mouth before he could stop it. James scowled at him, but the expression was playful this time.

Snape continued to stare at James so intensely that for a moment Sirius was worried that he could see through James’s disguise, but then he pointed his wand up at the gate and cast a protection spell over the metal, the gate locking firmly behind them.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Buck,” McGonagall said, offering her hand to shake. James, his face so red that it could be seen through the glamour, reached out and shook her hand politely, but he couldn’t meet her eyes. Sirius was going to relive this memory for the rest of his life.

“The game should be starting soon,” Regulus said, urging them to get a move on. He was also staring at James, but with an unreadable look on his face. When James looked back at him, he truly looked like a deer in headlights, his eyes wide and daunted.

“Let’s go,” Sirius said. He’d gotten over the lying, he really had, but that didn’t mean he had to stand around watching his best friend stare at his little brother like he’d never seen anything so beautiful. Truly, that was just torture. Remus reached back out and squeezed his hand comfortingly, as if he could read his thoughts and feel his distress. Sirius gave him a grateful smile.

The four of them walked together to the pitch — McGonagall and Snape heading up to the castle to handle something before the game. Regulus and James walked next to each other, close but still with a sliver of space between them so they never touched. James nearly tripped over his own feet four times because he wouldn’t look away from Regulus’s face.

Sirius and Remus walked behind them, listening as Regulus and James talked quietly to each other. Well, Regulus talked quietly, and James mostly just listened, his mouth hanging open a bit.

“Merlin, I feel like I’m chaperoning a pair of teenagers on a date,” Sirius muttered under his breath.

“Yeah,” Remus agreed, cringing slightly. “I don’t even remember feeling this old when I was working as a professor.”

Sirius snickered. “I’ve never seen James look so pathetic,” Sirius whispered.

Remus smiled, dropping his hand so that he could put an arm around Sirius’s shoulders, pulling him that tiny bit closer as they walked, perfectly in step with one another.

When they made it to the pitch, they climbed the stairs of the Gryffindor section, several students already heading to their seats around them. Regulus led them right to Harry’s group of friends, Hermione, Luna, Neville, and two other girls were standing in a group, all decked out in Gryffindor colors. Sirius was just glad he still had a Gryffindor scarf he could wear, otherwise he would have stood out even worse.

They all turned to look at them in excitement, many jumping forward to greet Remus like he was a celebrity. Sirius knew he was a great professor, he wouldn’t have expected anything less, but it was satisfying to see the looks of admiration in the student’s eyes.

“It’s good to see you all,” Remus said magnanimously. All at once, they jumped into multiple long complaints about the terrible Defense professors they’d had since he’d left. Remus listened to them politely, the soft smile never leaving his lips even as the stories grew worse

and worse. They were so enthralled by it that they barely noticed the rest of the pitch filling up around them.

They were playing Ravenclaw, but as the team entered the pitch, flying in a synchronized form above their heads, Sirius could instantly tell they were going to lose. He hadn't watched a Quidditch game in years, but he always knew.

When he was just a boy, his family used to go watch Abraxans race as part of their family gatherings. It was one of the few things that Sirius thoroughly enjoyed, and he loved watching the Abraxans walk around in a circle before heading out to the track. Abraxans had wings, but there were so many different types of races that involved them staying grounded. Sirius always found that fascinating.

His mother was always excellent at predicting which Abraxan would win. He could still remember asking her how she knew. He was very young then; their relationship hadn't soured beyond repair.

She looked down her nose at him while he asked, then lifted her chin as she said, "Just watch how they look at each other. Abraxans are naturally competitive, they want to win more than we want them to, but only the ones with drive survive." She pointed at one specific one, its legs a little shorter than the others. "See the way it keeps looking away from its path, just to watch the others?"

Sirius nodded, though he hadn't fully understood then.

"He wants to win more than the others."

"And that means he will?" Sirius asked. Walburga smirked down at him, her eyes vicious.

"It means he'll try harder."

That conversation had fundamentally changed something in Sirius, he'd thought about every time he was about to play a game, every time he was about to see anyone go head-to-head. The person who wanted to win more didn't always triumph, but it made them a lot harder to beat.

The Gryffindor team erupted from below in a wide fan of movement, circling the pitch like they owned it. Sirius spotted Harry immediately, a fiercely determined look on his face. He noticed Ron and Ginny up there with him as well, their red hair bright in the sunlight. The crowd around them was shouting so loud that Sirius couldn't hear anything over the noise, but he didn't need to. Seeing Harry up there, surveying the pitch, made his chest feel like it was too big for his clothes.

They still had a few moments before the game began, so Sirius started waving his arms trying desperately to get Harry's attention. Remus and James must have noticed him because a moment later, they were doing the same thing. Sirius could see Regulus watching them out of the corner of his eye and he looked down to meet his eyes. He was smiling, really smiling. Sirius rarely got to see him look like that, he rarely got to watch Regulus look happy.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked suddenly. He’d flown down while Sirius was distracted. He looked overjoyed to see them there.

“We wanted to see you play,” James answered, grinning up at his son. Harry’s eyebrows furrowed for a moment, but after a second it seemed to click for him.

He gasped. “Oh! You’re—How? I can’t believe it.” Then he looked at Regulus like he knew Regulus was the reason they were all here. His eyes were shining, something unspoken, something like gratitude swimming there.

“Go on, the game's about to start,” Regulus said bashfully. Harry smiled one more time before speeding off to the center of the pitch where Madam Hooch was waiting for him.

“He’s amazing,” James said, looking over at Regulus. Regulus just smiled back. Both of them looked so proud, as proud as Sirius felt. He couldn’t believe they’d made it here, that even in this extreme danger and after everything they’d faced, they’d made it here to watch Harry play Quidditch.

Sirius only had a moment to acknowledge the way Regulus and James were still staring at each other before he heard Madam Hooch’s whistle, and the game began.

the tower.

Chapter Notes

cw: murder

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Make sure you stay hidden until the last possible minute.” James nodded; his face drawn in concentration. “James, I’m not joking.”

“Do I look like I’m laughing?” James said softly. He looked serious, far more serious than Remus had ever seen him, but still, Remus’s chest felt tight with worry.

“I know you’re not,” Remus said, placing a firm hand on James’s shoulder. He hadn’t wanted James here tonight, not originally, but Regulus and Sirius wanted him here even less. After their meeting with Dumbledore, the one that happened right after the final Quidditch game, Regulus had drawn a hard line around James.

He’d been adamant that James would remain in the new safe house, not even trusting Grimmauld to keep him safe. He’d wanted Sirius and Remus there too. And Harry. Like a little kid hiding all their toys, because there was a storm outside, Regulus was collecting the people he was most worried about and trying to protect them. But he seemed to know that forcing all of them to avoid Hogwarts when Death Eaters were planning to enter the school wasn’t actually something he could achieve.

So instead, he focused on James. The person who had no reason to be at the school, who the Order didn’t know about. James hadn’t been happy about it. Well, at first, he seemed a bit starry-eyed to be so fiercely protected. Remus had politely looked away from him because he felt like James would be embarrassed to have someone watching him like that. But after the stars had faded from his vision, they were replaced by a deep-set frown that wouldn’t disappear, even after they left Hogwarts and returned to Grimmauld.

“This is a crazy plan,” Sirius had said to him that night. “I’m glad James is staying out of it.”

Remus had only nodded because he felt the way a storm was brewing in James’s bedroom on the floor below them. That storm had made landfall while Remus was having breakfast three days later and at first, he did his best to dismiss James’s childish pleas to be included, but James was a very hard person to say no to.

He always had been, even as an eleven-year-old. He had this sad little look he got on his face, one that made Remus feel like he was a terrible person for saying no.

It was frustrating that James still had that power over him, but it wasn’t just that that made him agree to James’s argument. It was the plan that James came up with — most likely on the

spot, but Remus respected it regardless.

So now they were on the top of the Astronomy Tower, hidden on the deck below, draped in shadows. James had the invisibility cloak thrown lazily over his shoulders making half of his body disappear each time the wind relented. For a split second, Remus worried that he might not see James again, that something might go wrong, but he shoved the feeling aside. He buried it. Because it would do him no good tonight. Distractions were only that.

“You have the portkey?” Remus asked again, he’d already asked him four times.

“I have everything,” James said. He smiled quickly. “Don’t worry. I’ll see you later tonight.”

Remus’s lips straightened unhappily, but he nodded. There wasn’t much left to say, and the sun was getting low, so he had to go meet the rest of the Order. He squeezed James’s shoulder one more time before starting the long walk down the Astronomy Tower’s stairs.

He felt like his shoes were full of lead, weighing him down. His chest was heavy with the unknown, with what they were about to face. He knew there was no way they could stay out of it but knowing that James and Sirius were back in the thick of it after all this time made him feel tired, right down to his bones.

He headed toward the Transfiguration classroom, that’s where the rest of the Order was waiting. Curfew had been moved up that evening, so the corridors were empty, the students already tucked safely into their common rooms. Regulus had suggested locking them in — Remus knew he was thinking specifically of the Gryffindors — but McGonagall had vetoed the idea. It was a safety hazard to lock students inside a room in Hogwarts, she’d said.

He could hear the sound of quiet voices as he headed out into the Transfiguration Courtyard, the classroom doors propped open underneath the stones across the open area. He crossed over the courtyard slowly, easily spotting someone waiting for him by the fountain.

“James all right?” Sirius asked. He had his arms crossed tightly over his chest, his all-black clothing making him appear like a dementor. A handsome dementor, but still.

“He’s fine,” Remus said. As he walked closer, Sirius dropped his arms, and at once, the two of them seemed to reach out toward each other. As if they both knew that the other one needed comfort, needed a final moment of peace before all hell broke loose.

He pulled Sirius close to his chest and kissed his temple once before looking down into his bright gray eyes.

“Is everyone here?”

“Most of them,” Sirius said. “Regulus went back to Gryffindor tower to handle something, but he should be back in just a bit.” He chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. “Tonks is here.”

That didn’t surprise Remus. Dora was a member of the Order, and she was a skilled Auror. It would have been foolish for them not to ask her. He still felt his body chill slightly. The guilt

over the way he'd treated her was still fresh in his thoughts.

"Are you okay?" he asked, rather than examining the complicated feelings swirling around inside of him.

Sirius gave a tight smile then nodded twice. "I'm fine. She asked if James was here. I told her that he was still back at Grimmauld. I figured... well, I know we're trying to keep it a secret."

Remus squeezed him once, already regretting the fact that he would have to let go soon. "I think that was a good idea. I know the two of them are friends, but the fewer people who know about what he's doing, the better."

Sirius seemed to relax slightly, Remus wondered if he was worried about the lie he'd told, if he thought Remus would judge him.

"Who else is here?" Remus asked.

"A couple Aurors, I don't know their names. They look young, they must have gone to school after we left. Bill Weasley is here. A few others." He shrugged.

"Let's join them," Remus said.

"Okay," Sirius agreed. He finally dropped his arms from around Remus's torso. Remus felt cold where Sirius had just been holding him. He already missed his presence.

The classroom grew quiet as they entered, but Remus didn't think it had anything to do with them specifically. The air was tense, and Remus could feel the way people were gearing up for a fight. He glanced around the room, nodding once at Dora when their eyes met, and tried to catalog who all was there.

It seemed like such a small group, even with the professors added into the mix. He knew there were more Order members, but they hadn't all been called. Remus didn't know why. This seemed like the opportune time for them to be invited.

Dumbledore stood in the center of the room, leaning against McGonagall's desk. He appeared to be listening to everyone around him, but there was tension around his mouth that made Remus think he wasn't paying attention as closely as he wanted to let on. It made Remus nervous. He wondered how many secrets were being kept in that old man's head. He wondered what parts of tonight were unknown to most of the people in this room.

"We don't have a lot of time, we should get started," Flitwick said. He was wearing casual clothes, almost muggle attire, and Remus was so shocked to see him that he didn't respond at first.

"Good idea," he finally said when no one else spoke up. Sirius gave him another tight smile just as Regulus came into the classroom, closing the door tightly behind him. Remus could see the confusion on the faces around him and he wondered how long it would take for someone to question why a child was being included in this plan.

It was surprisingly Bill Weasley who spoke up first. “Sorry, why is he here? I thought all the students were in the common rooms already.”

“Regulus is going to help us tonight,” Dumbledore said.

“He’s a child,” McGonagall responded sharply. Remus didn’t want to, but he saw no other way out. He elbowed Sirius in the side lightly. Sirius looked at him confusedly for a moment before understanding dawned on his face.

“He’s my son,” Sirius said, uncertainly, his voice tilting up at the end like it was a question. The room was deathly silent, everyone watching, waiting for what he would say next. When the seconds began to drag by, Regulus let out a very quiet sigh. Sirius cleared his throat awkwardly. “I’ve decided that it’s fine for him to be here.”

“Siri—Mr. Black, are you sure this is a good idea?” McGonagall asked tightly.

“He’ll be fine,” Sirius replied stiltedly.

“Thanks for that vote of confidence,” Regulus mumbled under his breath. Remus was sure that he only heard it because he was a werewolf. Sirius didn’t appear bothered.

Dumbledore looked mildly entertained watching the interaction, but as Regulus settled back against the wall next to Sirius, Dumbledore’s face settled back into a solemn expression.

During the first war, Remus hadn’t spent much time attending Order meetings. It felt like they’d joined late, like the war was already in full swing by the time they’d graduated, though he didn’t know if that was true or not. But he was lost in the war soon after graduation. He was sent off on his own almost immediately. He spent weeks and months away with the other werewolves, coming back to report to Dumbledore directly. Sometimes he would come and go without seeing another soul, not even Sirius.

By the time he realized what he was missing, it was already too late. James and Lily were in hiding, Sirius was lost to anger, grief, and paranoia, and Peter was always missing. All Remus had was Dumbledore and his soft-spoken directives pushing him into danger.

It was different seeing him now. He couldn’t help but wonder if this was the Dumbledore that the rest of them knew. Though that kindly spirit was still there, he also held himself with a level of confidence that made him seem intimidating. He was more of a war general than a school headmaster.

Remus didn’t know how to feel.

He wanted to reach out and grab Sirius’s hand, just to hold him close for a bit, but he didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable. He didn’t know who knew about them, and though people were typically understanding and accepting, that didn’t guarantee that they all would be.

Not to mention that he didn’t want to make Dora uncomfortable. She needed her focus tonight just like the rest of them did.

Abruptly, he wondered if Regulus was worried about James. He hadn't seen them have a conversation since before they made the plans, not anything beyond the letters they exchanged. He wondered if Regulus wished he'd been the one to check on James in the Astronomy Tower. They'd decided Remus should go because all of them agreed he would probably be the quickest, but that didn't necessarily mean that was what Regulus wanted.

"Are you ready?" Regulus asked suddenly. In the moments that Remus had been lost in his thought, the classroom had emptied. He caught the tail end of a few people leaving, Sirius giving him one more smile — one that didn't meet his eyes — before he left with one of the Aurors.

"Sorry," Remus said. "I was—Sorry."

"Yes, so you said," Regulus muttered. "We're going to the Room of Hidden Things. Draco is already waiting for us."

Remus raised his eyebrows. "You left him up there alone?" Remus asked.

"He doesn't know how to work the vanishing cabinet. I made sure of it."

"Okay," Remus replied. They walked quickly through the castle toward the seventh floor, but the icy silence around them was putting Remus on edge. So on edge that he kept getting caught in his thoughts again, wondering where Sirius could be, wondering who he would be fighting beside, wondering why he was with Regulus.

"Hello?" Regulus snapped his fingers once in front of Remus's eyes. "Have you been *Imperiused*? What is wrong with you?"

"Why did they put us together?" Remus asked rather than answering.

Regulus gave him an odd look. "Sirius suggested it."

"Oh," Remus replied.

Regulus continued to stare at him out of the corner of his eye, before finally taking pity on him. "It wasn't like they were going to let you two be together. If one of you got hurt, you'd likely both die."

"Oh," Remus repeated. "I guess that makes sense. I'm assuming that's why you and Sirius aren't together."

"No, that I personally requested from Dumbledore."

"Why?"

"Sirius has been cooped up with for months," Regulus said. "And while I'm sure you keep him plenty... occupied." Remus felt his face turn red. "That doesn't mean that Sirius isn't itching for something to do. He's going to be reckless tonight, that can't be helped, but that doesn't mean I want to be there watching him do it. Especially when I have to help Draco first."

“You don’t think Draco would like Sirius?” Remus asked, only partially joking. Regulus gave a half smile.

“You didn’t know Narcissa well, I’m assuming,” Regulus said.

“I went to school with her.”

Regulus rolled his eyes, letting out a small laugh. “Right, of course. And I’m sure the two of you spent plenty of time together.”

Remus tried not to smile. “Not exactly.”

“Well, my cousin, she’s very…” His shoulders moved up and down once as he searched for the word.

“Stuck up?”

“Demure,” Regulus said, his lips pursed like he was trying not to let another laugh out.

“Right,” Remus agreed with faux seriousness.

“Draco isn’t quite so put together, but that seems to be his go-to attitude when he’s afraid.” He frowned suddenly, soberness settling back over them in an instant. “I don’t think he’s been anything but afraid in months. Probably since he met with Tom Riddle.”

Remus felt a pang of sympathy. “How does Sirius fit into that?”

“Sirius is the opposite of demure,” Regulus said. “He’d make one joke, and Draco would try and call the whole thing off.”

“And you think he’ll do better with—”

“*He* knows how to behave himself. Sirius cannot be convinced.”

Remus laughed, louder than he’d intended to, but it made Regulus smile again, so he couldn’t bring himself to regret it. They walked in silence for another few minutes before something occurred to him.

“Since when do you call Voldemort ‘Tom Riddle?’”

Regulus stared straight ahead, his back and neck so straight that he looked like a toy soldier marching down a child’s bedroom. “I couldn’t keep calling him the Dark Lord and I can’t call him… *that* .”

“Okay,” Remus said patiently.

Regulus was quiet for a moment before he continued talking. “It seemed odd to call him anything else after seeing so many memories of him as a child and a teenager. He’s a monster, but he’s also a man. Just a man.”

Remus wasn't sure if Regulus believed that his words seemed to hold so much weight, and yet they fell out of his mouth like they were feathers in the wind. He didn't push Regulus on it though. To him, it felt like growth. It felt like Regulus moving on from the part of him that felt only fear when he thought of Voldemort.

"Where have you been? I've been waiting here for an hour." Draco's voice was tight with anxiety, and it echoed down the corridor when he caught sight of them.

"It hasn't been an hour," Regulus said with a sigh, sounding like a tired parent.

"I timed it," Draco said fiercely. His eyes flicked to Remus for a split second. "What is he doing here?" he whispered.

"He's here to help us," Regulus said.

"I thought it was just going to be you and I," Draco hissed.

Remus hadn't thought much about Regulus's protection of Draco. He understood it on a surface level, the desire to protect a kid that he saw so much of himself in, but that didn't mean that he understood why Regulus would go to such lengths to ensure his safety, especially when he seemed more unhappy to be inconvenienced than thankful for the protection.

But when he watched Draco step forward to Regulus, looking more like a child begging for guidance than anything, Remus thought he understood. It wasn't just that Draco was family or that the two of them were similar, it was that Draco was drowning and Regulus would never be able to turn his back on someone like that, especially not when they looked at Regulus like that, like he was the only one they trusted.

"It'll be fine," Regulus said softly. "You remember what you have to do, right?"

Draco bit the inside of his cheek once then let it go and nodded, clenching his teeth together.

"Don't divert from the path, just head straight for the Astronomy Tower. Dumbledore will tell you what to do then."

"And Snape will get a letter to my parents?" Draco asked.

"He said that he would. Don't worry. They're clever, they'll be fine. Just worry about staying alive and getting to safety. You can't see your parents again if you die tonight."

Draco cringed but ultimately nodded. Remus wanted to say something to him, but he wasn't sure what. He supposed there would be time for that in the future. Draco gave him a dark, untrustworthy look before heading toward the Barnabas the Barmy tapestry.

Regulus was the one to summon the room. Remus had never seen it in person. He'd only heard about it from Harry and Sirius. It was strange how even after all this time, magic could still surprise him so much. He gasped as he entered the massive room, filled to the brim with lost items, furniture, and a whole host of other things.

“This way,” Regulus said, leading down a path between two piles of broken chairs that had been piled so high that they were meeting at the top in a high arch. Draco followed quickly with Remus taking up the rear. He tried to keep a close watch on them though, while also trying to take in his surroundings in case he had to find his way back to the door.

It didn't take them long to reach the vanishing cabinet. Remus wouldn't have known it was there if he hadn't been told. It was nestled into another pile of objects and blended in with its surroundings making it difficult to find. Regulus put two fingers on it when they got close, his eyebrows furrowed deeply over his eyes.

“You need to move the moment the first one comes through the door. Don't wait for them to catch up with you, they just need enough time to spot you.” Draco nodded. “Stand back,” Regulus instructed. “*Harmonia Nectar Passus* .”

Remus heard an odd sound, almost like a clicking noise, then Regulus was spinning around and dragging him behind a pile of objects. Remus cast a disillusionment charm over the both of them as they knelt to the ground, both of their wands poised to attack.

“How long do you think it'll take?” Remus asked.

Regulus shook his head. Remus could only tell because of the slight noise the movement made. “I'm not sure,” he said. “It's been pretty quick in the past.”

After a few slow breaths, Remus finally caught sight of the vanishing cabinet door opening. It eased open slowly while Draco took another step backward. From the odd angle, Remus couldn't tell what Draco was seeing, but it must have been one of the Death Eaters because he turned on his heel a second later and started briskly walking back toward the door.

“Get ready,” Regulus said. They'd agreed to wait until all of them were out of the cabinet. The aim was to only take out the last one or two before they left the Room of Hidden Things. They didn't want there to be a chance of any of them hurrying back through the cabinet to tell anyone about the ambush.

“We could get all of them,” Regulus had said during their planning stage. Sirius had just given him a disbelieving look. “If we're all in the Room of Hidden Things, then we could all ambush them.”

“But then if any of them escape, they'll have free reign of the rest of the school,” Remus had argued.

“Not to mention that there won't be anyone to go back and share the news about Draco,” Sirius added.

“Fine,” Regulus had grumbled, a dark look in his eyes.

They had to let someone through, ideally a handful of them so that it didn't seem too obvious that they were being picked off like a school of fish, but then something went wrong. One moment they were watching the cabinet through the low lights of the magically lit candles around them, and the next they were enveloped in darkness.

He felt Regulus move next to him and he instinctively grabbed him by the shoulder and started pulling him backward away from the cabinet. He couldn't make out anything around them, but he knew instantly that if they'd thought to do this then they must have been expecting an ambush, which meant he and Regulus were in danger.

Remus could hear their footsteps, there were at least five of them, but they sounded like they were moving away, following in the same direction that Draco had gone in.

"Let me go," Regulus hissed.

"Not until this clears," Remus said.

Regulus started whispering spells trying to clear the smoke, but nothing was working. He growled low in his throat. "I told them to stop selling this. I knew it would be bad. I didn't realize some of it had already been bought."

"What are you talking about?" Remus asked frantically.

"It's Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder," Regulus explained. "Fred and George import it to their shop."

"Oh, no," Remus said. "This is bad."

"Quite," Regulus responded through clenched teeth. "Come on, we need to get moving. Just try to stay close to the edge."

They had to move slowly, their shins repeatedly bumping up against the piles of trash as they tried to maneuver their way out of the darkness. It was slow going and Remus could feel how frustrated Regulus was getting as they went. If he had to guess, he would say that it took them nearly half an hour to make it to the door, and the moment they collided with the wood, Regulus rushed through it without another thought.

Remus half expected to find Death Eaters in the corridor waiting for them, but it was empty.

"Do you think they're already at the Astronomy Tower?" Remus whispered.

Regulus pulled out the map, opening it with a quick whisper. Remus leaned over his shoulder to search it with him. He spotted Sirius running down a corridor a few floors below them. He was alone, but he was headed straight for Bill and Dora who looked like they were in a fight with Thorfinn Rowle and Fenrir Greyback.

Remus's body went cold, his breathing cutting off. Before he could think, he was moving, sprinting down the hallway toward the stairs. He could hear Regulus moving behind him, but he wasn't paying attention.

Fenrir was here. Fenrir was in the castle. And Sirius was running toward him. Fenrir knew. He had to know what Sirius was to him. What else did he know? What else would he do? His mind filled with images of Sirius dead and bloody on the cold, hard ground of the castle. His heart felt like it was sputtering out in his chest. He was sure that it would stop beating altogether if something happened to Sirius. If he died. If Remus lost him.

He made it down to the lower floor in record time, but he could only hear the quiet grunts and spells of two people fighting. He came around the corner, a Full Body-Bind out of his mouth before he could even raise his wand.

Fenrir went flying. Remus could smell him all the way down the hallway, sulfur and dirt and blood. Remus's spell was so strong that Fenrir hit the wall next to him before slamming into the ground with a dull thud, his body frozen like he'd been sitting in ice, his eyes staring up at the ceiling.

Remus could see another person in the corridor. Dora was gone, he could tell that the person on the floor was a man, but there was too much blood to see who it was. He tripped over his feet as he ran forward, falling to the floor right next to the bloodied man. The moment he was close enough to make out hair color, he felt a wave of relief so intense that he was sure he'd feel guilty about it for the rest of his life.

"It's Bill!" he shouted at Regulus who was just coming around the corner, panting heavily.

Bill was out cold, but he could hear his faint heartbeat underneath his own breathing, and he knew he was still alive. Fenrir had scratched his face violently; blood was pooling into his ginger hair. Remus lifted his wand to cast something, he didn't know what, when he heard footsteps approaching from the opposite direction.

He looked up hoping to see Sirius, but it was Dora that was running toward him.

"Is he alive?" she shouted.

"Yes, but he needs help," Regulus said urgently, jumping to his feet. He had the map in his hands again and was searching for something, Remus hoped it was Sirius, but he didn't say it. "I have to go. Can you take him to Pomfrey?"

"Yeah," Dora said breathlessly, already levitating Bill off the ground. "What about him?" She pointed her head toward Fenrir, still frozen next to them.

"Remus will handle it," Regulus said, turning to Remus with a look so vicious and hungry that Remus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Without another word, Regulus, Dora, and Bill were gone, heading in opposite directions down the corridor.

Remus stood slowly to his feet, his knees aching from where they'd hit the ground. He wouldn't be able to walk tomorrow, he could already tell. He looked down at Fenrir. His eyes could move now, but just enough to search Remus's face. His expression was blank, forced into stillness by magic, but Remus could still picture the vile, cocky smile that Fenrir had worn the last time they'd seen each other.

He was a monster, an animal. He made Remus feel sick to his stomach. And now he was lying powerless before him. Remus could tie him up, he could give him to the Aurors. He *should* give him to Aurors.

But that had happened before, and he'd gotten out. Remus was a werewolf because of it.

Azkaban couldn't be trusted anymore, not with the way things were going, and the Ministry had always been corrupt.

If Fenrir survived, he would get out again, he would taste freedom again. He hadn't hurt Sirius this time, but that didn't mean he never would.

Fenrir was fighting against the spell; Remus could see it loosening. Werewolves could fight off magic quicker than most wizards and Fenrir wouldn't be frozen for long. But Remus couldn't bring himself to move.

Instead, he found himself lost in thought, lost in a memory, of being in the forest with Sirius, of giving himself over to the animal inside him so that he could keep Sirius for himself. He'd spent his entire life trying to fight off the wolf, trying to keep him at bay. He already took one night every month; Remus didn't want him to have anything else.

But Sirius had never seen him that way. He didn't love Remus while rejecting the wolf. He didn't even love Remus and the wolf as separate beings. He loved them both. He accepted them both.

It had been on that trip, in that forest, that Remus had come to accept his wolf. Moony was a part of him, and if that made him an animal, then it made him an animal.

He knelt down next to Fenrir's head, dropping his wand with a clatter on the ground. Fenrir stared up at him defiantly. Remus's body seemed to move without his permission. His hand reached out, his fingers grazing over Fenrir's cheek. It was almost kind, almost soft, but even Fenrir could tell that that wasn't the truth.

His eyes widened slightly and for the first time, Remus saw fear cross Fenrir's face. He wondered how many times Fenrir had made someone feel that emotion. Countless times, he guessed. Had Fenrir ever been afraid? Had anyone ever made him feel that way? Anyone before Remus, that was.

His fingers brushed over Fenrir's mouth once, then his hand settled over Fenrir's mouth and nose. His fingers clamped down onto both nostrils, forcing them closed, as his palm kept air from flowing into his mouth. Fenrir was fighting, but the spell was still holding. Despite Fenrir's extra magic, Remus could already feel that the spell would hold, that it wouldn't fail him now, not in time to save Fenrir's life.

He'd accepted that he was an animal. He *was* an animal. *He was a wolf.*

But he murdered Fenrir like a man.

Chapter End Notes

i've decided to run my very own fest. so if you're a writer, artist, or beta who is interested in creating some creature-related content for the marauders, please sign up to

join [here](#).

the tower part II.

It was late June, nearly July, so there was no reason that James should be shivering against the wind like he was, but the Scottish cold was sailing over his skin like a ship heading directly into a storm making him shake slightly. His teeth chattered together for a split second before he got a grip on himself, clenching his jaw closed. He'd had so many memorable moments in the Astronomy Tower, moments that were burned into his soul, marking him into a maze of love, grief, sorrow, and desire.

It felt strange to be back under such different circumstances. He was hidden on the deck below this time. He rarely came down here when he was a student at Hogwarts, only to grab supplies for class. It wasn't like there was much to do there that couldn't be done on the top floor. It made him feel displaced to spend so much time there like he'd been dragged back to the land of living just to end up wrong.

He pondered if he would feel so out of place had he not spent so much time in the hands of the Unspeakables. He worried that that time had done more damage to him than he'd originally realized.

He shook himself, he couldn't lose his focus now. He'd fought too hard to be here tonight to mess it up. Everyone had been so adamant about him not participating, Regulus especially had insisted that he stay locked away, as he had been for months, but James didn't think he could stand it.

He kept imagining a long night of waiting, the silence in the house around him bearing down on his shoulders, squeezing him into a tiny ball of unending anxiety. He didn't think he would survive it. What if something happened and James was just lounging around the house, completely unaware? The thought made him feel nauseous.

Not that he would know if something happened now. He was still isolated from the rest of his friends, but at least he was here, at least he was doing something.

Waiting in the Astronomy Tower had actually been his own idea. He'd been arguing with Remus repeatedly since the night when they spoke to Dumbledore and at first, Remus was unwilling to budge. Sirius used to be the easiest one to convince to do something—well, Peter was, but Peter was no longer an option—but Sirius wasn't like that anymore. He had a stiffness to him, developed only through the long torturous years in Azkaban, that made him difficult to sway.

Remus, on the other hand, had turned into a big softy. He'd always been a bit soft, but when they were young, he'd had a backbone that intimidated James. Now, James could clock the exact moment that Remus began to give in to whatever he wanted. So he'd approached Remus and pestered him over and over again until he landed on the perfect argument.

“Regulus is going to be worried about getting Draco out, right? Well, what if I made sure that he made it back to Grimmauld safely? I know I can't be seen, but I could hide under the Invisibility Cloak and wait for Draco. That way no one else has to worry about him.”

Remus had hummed uncertainly, his eyebrows furrowed while he stared at James measuredly. His left eye twitched and James nearly threw his hands in the air in triumphant. A left-eye twitch meant that he was going to agree. Maybe not right away, but eventually. And James could work with eventually.

Remus eventually caved—as James predicted—and Sirius and Regulus fell soon after, so now James was here in secret, hidden under the invisibility cloak. Only Dumbledore was aware of their plan, no one else in the Order could know. Almost none of them knew that James was alive to begin with. Even Tonks wasn't told even though she was downstairs somewhere helping them prepare. He hoped she would be all right, he would really like the opportunity to continue their friendship and he didn't think he would handle losing someone else very well.

He didn't even consider the possibility of losing Regulus, Remus, or Sirius. It was too unthinkable now. Too painful.

The night dragged slowly. James's legs ached from standing in the same spot for so long, but he wouldn't allow himself to relax. He wouldn't mess this up, not for anything in the world.

After the sun had set and darkness reigned, he heard the sound of footsteps slowly climbing the stairs of the Astronomy Tower. He held his breath waiting to see who it was. There was always a chance that it was someone who shouldn't be out in the castle — a student, maybe, or a professor who ended up in the wrong place.

He let out a sigh of relief when he saw Dumbledore ascend the stairs. His face was oddly blank, the typical sparkle in his eyes missing. His gaze settled on James, easily spotting him through the invisibility cloak. James still didn't know how he managed to do that. He wondered how many times Dumbledore had spotted him or one of his friends under the cloak during his time at Hogwarts. Surely they would have gotten detention a lot more often if he'd seen them, but then again, he was always unpredictable. Even Regulus confessed that he thought Dumbledore had a soft spot for pranksters, he seemed to love the Weasley twins.

Dumbledore and James stared at each other for a long moment, something passing between them. He'd never understood Dumbledore well, being in a room with him was like being met with his own inadequacy and the knowledge that he would never be smart enough to make plans like Dumbledore did. He still didn't understand his gaze, but something settled deep in his chest as he looked at the man, something he couldn't articulate. He felt like he could sense the world shifting around him, dominos he hadn't seen falling into place.

Tonight they would let Death Eaters enter the castle and Draco Malfoy would leave the castle for the last time, maybe ever. Things would change, but Dumbledore's gaze spoke to so much more, moves upon moves that James couldn't see from his gilded cage. The future stretched out before them in an endless unknown.

A door opened below them, the creaking noise echoing up the stone tower so loudly that it sounded like it was coming from right next to them.

Dumbledore nodded at James, a small tip of his head, and smiled kindly. It would have been comforting under different circumstances. Then he started to ascend the steps to the top floor

of the tower. He disappeared from view right as the noise of someone sprinting up the stairs sounded beneath them.

James spotted Draco's blonde hair first, it was so bright even in the dull light that he was sure he could spot it from miles away. If he hadn't already known Lucius Malfoy, he would have thought that Draco was dying his hair to achieve that color. Draco didn't even glance his way, he hadn't been informed of James's involvement, before he climbed the steps to where Dumbledore was waiting.

"They're behind me," he said breathlessly. "They'll be here any minute."

"I understand," Dumbledore said evenly.

"What am I supposed to do?" Draco asked. He sounded distrustful. There was a high-strung quality to his voice that reminded James very much of Regulus. Perhaps it was a family trait. It made him miss the days when Regulus would complain to him about simpler things: their classes, other students, annoying professors. He'd enjoyed Regulus's bizarre stress levels back then, they didn't feel very fun now.

"Go below, a member of the Order of Phoenix is waiting to take you to safety. You will have to wait until the others have vacated the tower before you both can leave."

"Which member?" Draco asked. Clever, James thought. He wondered if most teenagers would have thought to ask such a question. Regulus had mentioned that Draco was unlikely to trust most of them, he wasn't exactly a golden boy, and James could practically see the way Draco would react to being taken away by a stranger.

"Stun him if necessary," Remus, of all people, had whispered to James a few days before. "No one can find him. If they do, then everything will fall apart."

"Okay," James agreed, a bit unnerved by the prospect of knocking out a teenage boy so he could whisk him away to a hidden property that only a handful of people knew about. It didn't exactly read well on paper. He understood what was at stake though. He wouldn't mess things up.

The sound of the door opening again kept Dumbledore from answering.

"Hurry, Draco," Dumbledore whispered. James didn't think he'd ever heard Dumbledore refer to a student by their first name. It sounded wrong coming from him, too personal, too frantic. Draco must have heard it too because he hurried down the stairs to where James was waiting without another word.

He looked around nervously, his hands shaking. "Where are you?" he whispered, sounding much younger than he had a moment ago. James waited for another couple of seconds, the sounds of footsteps getting closer with every passing moment, until Draco was finally close enough. He moved as quickly as he could then, throwing the cloak over Draco and pulling him backward in the same motion.

Draco opened his mouth to yell in surprise, but James was faster. He covered his mouth with the palm of his hand right as three Death Eaters arrived. James didn't get a good look at them, but he was sure two of them were wearing masks. Draco froze in his arms when he saw them. He was only a few inches shorter than James, but he felt small regardless. He trembled slightly, whether from adrenaline or fear, James didn't know.

"Where is Malfoy?" a voice sneered. Not even a second passed before there was a loud gasp. "You—"

"Young Mr. Malfoy tried to kill me. Surely, you can understand," Dumbledore said, his voice quiet like he was delivering bad news. James wondered what they were seeing, but based on the change in tone, he could guess.

"Snape," Draco whispered from behind James's hand. James looked toward the stairs to see Severus Snape climbing the stairs with a bored look on his face. He wasn't running like the other Death Eaters, he was moving like he had all the time in the world.

"The Malfoy boy has failed," one of the Death Eaters whispered.

"Not completely," Snape drawled. James could hear the sounds of the Death Eaters turning to look at him, their boots loud against the wooden floor above them. "Albus." He said Dumbledore's name with a disdain that was usually reserved for James and Sirius. Something in James twisted, his stomach formed into a solid ball of lead. Snape was working with them, even Sirius had said so, though begrudgingly, but that voice.

Draco let out a strangled breath, James loosened his hold instantly. He hadn't realized he'd been holding him so tightly, his arms straining as his brain struggled to understand what he was hearing. He made the mistake of giving Draco too much leeway though and he turned to look James directly in the eyes.

His eyebrows furrowed as his mouth dropped open.

"Who—"

James covered his mouth quickly, raising his eyebrows in an attempt to remind Draco exactly where they were and who might hear them. The silence above them was loaded, filled with tension. Neither Draco nor James could see what was happening there, but they could feel that something was shifting.

Neither of them could move, they could only wait, frozen while they stared each other down, as Dumbledore's very quiet voice filled the tower.

"Severus," he said with great meaning. "Please."

James's heart was racing. He felt like he couldn't breathe.

"*Avada Kedavra*," Snape said. His voice was devoid of emotion, back to the empty drawl that annoyed James so much. It didn't annoy him now, now it sent a shiver down his spine.

Draco was facing away from the stairs toward a half-hidden railing that opened up into the night sky. It shouldn't have meant anything, the direction he was facing, but James caught his eyes gliding over James's shoulder and widening in alarm. Without looking, without asking, James knew he'd just witnessed the body of Albus Dumbledore falling from the Astronomy Tower.

Dead. He was dead.

"We're leaving," Snape snapped.

"What about—"

"Leave the boy's body. The Order is already on their way."

Draco jolted when the words 'boy's body' left Snape's mouth. James didn't blame him. He sounded so dismissive as if the sight of Draco dead on the floor of the Astronomy Tower was nothing more than a bit of discarded trash. Did Snape know about the plan to hide Draco? Regulus had made it seem like he did.

The Death Eaters moved swiftly, Snape leading the pack. They ran down the steps of the Astronomy Tower, leaving Draco and James frozen in silent terror. The moment the door below them opened and slammed closed, Draco was shoving away from James, tumbling out from under the invisibility cloak like it was trying to suffocate him.

He stared at where James was still standing over him then blinked once and started sprinting up the stairs to where Dumbledore had just been killed. James only realized what he was heading up there to look at a moment too late.

"Draco, don't," James said, rushing after him. Draco didn't listen to him, James wasn't offended, he was a complete stranger. Not to mention that James didn't think he could stop himself from looking at a replicate of his own dead body, he would be far too curious. He still sprinted after him though, hoping to spare him from seeing something so horrible, but Draco was fast.

He was already covering his mouth in horror by the time James made it up to him. He was staring down at his corpse, eyes wide and vacant as they stared unseeing at the ceiling, his skin already turning a dull gray. Dumbledore had done an impressive job. James had always thought that someone's transfigurations expired after they died, but maybe he used a different type of magic. The reminder that Dumbledore was dead, had *just* died, made James double over in shock.

Everything seemed to hit him all at once, stealing his breath right out of his chest.

"Draco," he gasped. "Draco, we have to go."

"He told them to leave me," Draco whispered.

James shook his head to clear it. "Draco," he snapped with more force than necessary. Draco jumped violently, spinning to look at him. "We have to leave before we're seen."

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Draco said. He sounded scared and he must have realized it because he straightened his spine like he was preparing for a fight. “Who are you?”

James sighed very quietly. “I’ll tell you, but we don’t have time right now.” Draco opened his mouth to argue so James hurried to finish speaking before Draco could intervene. “Regulus sent me to make sure you got out safely.”

“Regulus?” Draco asked, raising an eyebrow. “Sirius’s son?”

Draco was testing him, he realized. The thought almost made him laugh. “No,” he said. “Sirius’s brother.”

Draco’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead. “Who are you? Why do you look like Harry Potter?”

Well, that was a new one. He supposed he did look like him, though it was more accurate to say Harry Potter looked like him considering he came first.

“I’ll tell you everything,” he repeated. “Please, we have to go. No one can see you.”

Draco looked down at his corpse one last time then clenched his teeth together like he was steadying himself. He looked James directly in the eye and finally, gratefully, nodded. “Okay,” he whispered.

“Follow me,” James said. They traveled down the steps of the Astronomy Tower quickly then James threw the invisibility cloak over both of them as they made their way through the rest of the castle to the Whomping Willow. He tried not to think about Dumbledore’s corpse, or Snape and the other Death Eaters. He definitely didn’t think about Regulus somewhere in the castle. It didn’t take them long, James knew enough secret passageways to get them there quickly.

Draco didn’t speak as they went into the secret passage to the Shrieking Shack, but James could see him looking around curiously. When they made it into the shack, James didn’t even give them enough time to breathe a word. He pulled the portkey out of his pocket and held it out to Draco to touch. Draco did so without question and in an uncomfortable moment, they were back in Grimmauld.

Draco was breathing hard, but he was clearly used to portkeying. He was standing straight and steady, his feverish eyes jumping from one thing to another rapidly as he took in the space.

“Is this the Black Ancestral Home?”

“Yes,” James said with a nod. The portkey affected him more than it had Draco so it took him a moment to feel normal again. “Have you been here before?”

“Only once,” Draco said quietly. “When I was a kid.” He glanced back at James. “Now, tell me who you are. Where is Regulus? Is he coming here?”

“He will, but probably not tonight, not with what happened to Dumbledore.”

“Oh,” Draco mumbled. He looked so sad hearing that Regulus wouldn’t be there that night that James wanted to hug him. He wouldn’t, he knew not to hug people who didn’t know him, but he often felt sad knowing Regulus wasn’t coming over—though admittedly for different reasons than Draco was sad—and he knew the feeling well.

“Do you want to sit down? You look a bit pale,” James said instead.

Draco shook his head, but he sat down anyway. His legs looked like they were trembling. James sat down next to him, just far enough away that they weren’t touching. He felt concerned and out of his element. Regulus spent all his time around teenagers, Remus had been a professor, James’s only experience with children was his infant son.

He didn’t know how to help, especially not when Draco dropped his head into his hands and started breathing so fast that it looked like he was going to pass out.

“Calm down,” James said frantically. That tone of voice probably wasn’t helping. “Draco, you have to calm down. Try and breathe, okay?”

“I thought Snape was helping you,” he said, his words barely understandable through his erratic breathing.

James swallowed harshly. “I did too,” he confessed. Regulus had said that Snape had shown favoritism toward Draco, that he believed Snape even cared for the boy, so he made an effort not to let out any of the anger he felt out into his words. Draco wasn’t responsible for Snape’s actions, he wasn’t going to hold him as such. Even if Snape had just murdered someone right before their eyes. Not just someone, but the one person Voldemort was afraid of, the one person who wasn’t family that tried to help Draco.

“He just left my body there,” Draco whispered. He sounded so haunted that James’s chest tightened. He scrambled for something to say, something that would comfort Draco

“That’s good though, isn’t it? If he brought it back, they might examine it. They would know it was fake.”

“Oh,” Draco breathed, his muscles loosening slightly. “I didn’t think about that.”

James hadn’t either, not until he was met with Draco’s distress did he truly think about the situation.

“Maybe... I don’t know. Maybe he was still trying to protect your parents.”

“By killing Dumbledore?” Draco asked.

James tried to swallow, but his throat suddenly felt too constricted to do so. “It’s what Voldemort wanted,” James whispered. Draco jolted.

“Don’t say that name around me,” Draco snarled.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” James said easily. He hadn't been afraid to say it since he'd been face to face with the man, he somehow seemed less scary after already being killed by him. “You Know Who wanted Dumbledore dead. He could have punished your parents if you failed, right?”

Draco shook his head, but James could tell that he was chewing on the information, struggling to work through it logically. It wouldn't do them any good tonight. He knew that they were probably out of the loop with everything else that had been planned for tonight. He would ask the others when he saw them. For now, he should just try to keep Draco calm.

“Do you still want to know who I am?”

Draco looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “Yes,” he said distrustfully.

“I'll tell you, but it's kind of an unbelievable story,” James said with a chuckle. “Are you hungry?”

“Why would I be hungry?” Draco said.

“Well,” James said slowly, “when was the last time you ate.”

Draco shrugged. Now that James was really looking, he was much thinner than a boy of his age should be. His cheeks had a gaunt quality to them that made him look older than he was. The knobs of his neck seemed to be sticking out of the skin.

“Come on, we can talk in the kitchen,” James said, already standing.

“The kitchen?” Draco asked bewilderedly. “Don't you have house elves?”

James shrugged. “I think they used to. I haven't seen one since I've been here.”

He led the way into the kitchen. Draco followed him uncertainly. He wondered if Draco had ever entered the kitchen in Malfoy Manor. He remembered listening to Sirius describe the way he was raised. His parents never cooked meals for them. He only knew where the food was stored because he had to steal food so often when he was a child.

“What are you hungry for?”

“I have no idea,” Draco mumbled.

“Just sit down, I'll make us some cheese toasties,” James said, nodding to the table. Draco sneered in disgust, but it seemed to be more out of habit than an action that had any real feeling behind it.

“So, who are you?” Draco asked once he was sitting, his hands folded in front of him like he was politely waiting for a serving of food. He looked dazed though, his eyes had a distant look about them, and the dark circles under his eyes seemed to be getting darker by the minute.

James looked away from him toward the stove. It was easier to say what he needed to say when he wasn't looking Draco in the eyes. The same eyes that both Regulus and Sirius had. That silver had known too many of his secrets, it unnerved him now.

"I'm Harry's father," James said simply.

"I'm sorry?" Draco said.

James snickered, the noise escaping him before he could stop it.

"Harry Potter. Surely you know him?"

James could practically hear Draco rolling his eyes. "Harry's parents are dead. Everyone in the wizarding world knows that."

"Well," James said, "I was dead. For a long time, actually, but then recently—"

"You came back to life?" Draco asked. "Like Regulus did?"

James paused for a second. "I didn't realize that you knew that."

"I was there the night he died," Draco said solemnly. "How were you—" he cleared his throat awkwardly, "revived?"

"The same way Regulus was," James replied. He finally risked a look back at the boy, but Draco wasn't looking at him. He was staring at the table in front of him. James was almost a little offended that he wasn't more surprised.

"Do you think the Dark Lord is going to kill my parents?" Draco whispered, that haunted quality was back.

James let out a long, low breath. He was nearly done cooking, so he finished as quickly as could, plating the food and walking over to sit next to Draco. He set his plate in front of him then put an arm around the back of Draco's chair. He was still careful not to touch him, but he couldn't stand the lost look in Draco's eyes.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "But from what I remember about Lucius and Narcissa, they're good at working together and figuring out situations."

"You knew my parents?" Draco asked.

The answer to that question was decidedly no. The most he'd ever interacted with either of them was on their wedding day which James had been invited to attend by Sirius, back when his relationship with his family hadn't fallen apart yet. He could still remember Regulus in his formal wizard robes, his hair gelled back against his head. Sirius had thought he looked ridiculous and had mocked him ruthlessly for the look. James wondered if he could find pictures from that day somewhere in the house.

"Not well," he answered. "But I know Sirius and Regulus very well and they knew them better than almost anyone. Especially Narcissa. I believe they'll be okay. I know they want

you to be safe.”

“They’re going to think I’m dead,” Draco whispered.

“Not forever,” James said. “Just for now. It’s all just a game. That’s all. We just have to play it right and then you can be reunited with them.”

Draco nodded once, but James didn’t think he really believed him.

“Eat,” James directed. “You’ll feel better. Then I can show you to your room.”

“I don’t what that is,” Draco said.

“A room?” James asked.

Draco barely cracked a smile, James counted that as a win. “No, that.” He nodded toward the cheese toastie that was still steaming on the plate in front of him.

James laughed quietly. “Sirius had never tried one either, but my mum used to make them for me. Muggles loves them. Just try it.”

Draco looked like he might be sick for a second and James was sure he was going to refuse, but then he slowly reached out and dragged the plate closer to him, picking up the food with a very uncertain look on his face. He took a bite like it might kill him, but it only took a few chews before his face relaxed.

“Oh, it’s good,” he mumbled. James slapped him on the back gently.

“See? I told you,” he said cheerfully.

They ate together in comfortable silence. James was surprised that he didn’t have more questions about who James was, but he assumed he was just overwhelmed. And tired. He looked very, very tired. He figured there would be more to come, especially if what Harry said about Draco’s attitude was true. For now, there was peace and James wasn't going to try and disturb it.

When Draco was finished eating, he let out a huge yawn, his eyes watering in the process. James smiled fondly at him. He couldn't help it. Draco wasn't even that much younger than him, but he felt a strange comfort offering him protection. As if he was making up for the way he'd failed to protect Harry.

“Ready for bed?”

“Is Regulus coming?” Draco asked nervously.

“He will,” James said. He was doing his best to not think about why no one was back yet. “Tomorrow though. You need rest.”

Draco pursed his lips but nodded after a moment. He followed James up to one of the guest rooms that Remus had specifically set up to house Draco before they moved to the other

house. On the bed was a pair of pajamas that Regulus had purchased. He'd bought him a whole wardrobe of clothes when he was sure Draco was coming home with them.

"He won't have anything," Regulus had said to James in one of their letters. "I think he'll feel more comfortable in something he's used to."

"The bathroom is down the hall," James said. "I'll be in the living room if you need anything."

Draco just nodded. James left him to his business. He was almost worried that Draco shouldn't be left alone but he doubted he would respond well to being smothered. He went down to the living room slowly, exhaustion settling deep into his bones, but his thoughts were already racing.

He couldn't do anything to satiate them. Not until someone came home. He hoped it wouldn't be long.

He sat down on the couch, staring at the floor, and waited.

the lovers.

Chapter Notes

my beta is traveling so if there are mistakes, just know they will be fixed later

When they were children, Sirius used to mock Regulus every single time he wore formal wizard robes. It would drive Regulus up the wall, he was secretly a very angry little boy, though he rarely let that emotion out. It wasn't like it was his fault that they had to wear wizard robes. Their parents made them. It drove Regulus crazy.

It wasn't until Sirius was ten and Regulus was nine when he caught Sirius wearing a set of his formal robes while dancing around his room that Regulus was able to let go of his anger.

It didn't feel so serious then. It was just a little boy giggling helplessly as he watched his big brother make a fool out of himself. They both might feel, and maybe even look, ridiculous in their robes, but Regulus wasn't the one that ever wore them for fun. He certainly didn't pretend to be attending a ball in his free time.

He never told Sirius about that moment. At the time, he'd planned to keep that secret until the perfect moment when it would cause the most impact. It was always good to have plans against Sirius, a secret this good couldn't be thrown away on simple mocking. Of course, he never actually got to use the secret. He and Sirius grew apart, their relationship deteriorated to the point where he was sure they'd never speak again, and by that point, he'd all but forgotten about ten-year-old Sirius in his formal robes.

He hadn't revisited that memory in a long time, but today it was burned onto the back of his eyelids, every time he closed his eyes he could see it.

They were both so innocent back then. Not exactly undamaged, their family would never have allowed for that, but less damaged, less weighed down by the life they'd lived. Now, Regulus wore that weight like a constant anchor dragging him to the bottom of the sea. Sirius usually wore it like a winter coat as if remembering his suffering would keep him safe from enduring anything else.

Somehow—and Regulus didn't know how he'd done it—Sirius looked like he'd taken that winter coat off today. He looked like he'd hung it up in the closet that he and Remus now shared, that he'd forgotten about it altogether. Regulus wondered when he would put it back in.

“Do I look stupid in these? I shouldn't have picked red. I look ridiculous,” Sirius said frantically, pulling at his sleeves like he thought if they were long enough they would shield him from judgment.

"I told you not to wear red," Regulus said unhelpfully.

Sirius gasped. "It's more of a burgundy," Sirius replied begrudgingly. Regulus scoffed.

"Yes, I can see that." He slapped Sirius's hand away. "Stop doing that, you're going to damage the fabric." Sirius dropped his hands, but he leaned forward into Regulus's personal space, their noses nearly touching.

"I should have worn a muggle suit," he whispered.

Regulus sneered in disgust, but only for a moment, he buried it as quickly as he could.

"Why?" Regulus asked emphatically. "Then you really would look ridiculous."

"I only wore this because Remus is wearing wizarding robes. Or he probably is."

"You two didn't talk about it?" Regulus asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

Sirius threw up his hands. "Of course not! It's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding."

"Sirius, there is no bride," Regulus said. "Unless there is something else you want to tell me."

"Don't joke," Sirius hissed.

Regulus rolled his eyes again. "Besides, that's a muggle superstition. That's what Hermione told me. I'm pretty sure our parents spent the entire morning together before their wedding."

"See! That's proof in itself."

"They stayed married their whole lives," Regulus argued.

"But they hated each other. You're being unhelpful."

"When did I offer to be helpful today? You're the one that insisted we do this so quickly."

"I didn't know when we would get another chance," Sirius said.

Regulus sighed, his shoulders dropping. "I know, but we could have waited until the end of the summer at least."

"It doesn't matter," Sirius said. "It's too dangerous for anyone to come anyway. Plus Bill and Fleur are getting married then and I didn't want to steal all their wedding guests."

"Who says that you would have been able to do that? Maybe everyone would go to Bill and Fleur's wedding instead."

"Please," Sirius said, the air of overconfidence returning to him like a well-worn path in the grass. "We both know that this would have been the event of the summer under different circumstances."

"There is something wrong with you," Regulus said dryly.

Sirius shrugged. He seemed like he wanted to say something else, Regulus was sure that he would find it annoying, but he was interrupted by Harry entering the room. He had a frown on his face again, it had become a near permanent companion for him in the last two weeks, but his eyes lit up when he saw both of them.

“Wow, that suit really is red,” Harry said jokingly.

“It’s burgundy,” Regulus and Sirius said at the same time. Harry let out a disbelieving laugh. It was just enough to cut the tension. Sirius still looked like he was seconds away from transforming into Padfoot just to escape the sheer amount of feelings he was experiencing, but he looked less likely to rip off his wizard robes than he did a moment ago which Regulus constituted as a success. Not that he’d been much help himself, but James should have known better than to send him in here to calm Sirius.

“I have my hands full with Remus already,” James had said urgently. Regulus had looked over at Remus to find him reading quietly by the window, already dressed in a brown muggle suit.

“He looks calm enough to me,” Regulus had mumbled.

“Don’t believe him,” James had whispered. “He only acts like this when he’s freaking out, trust me.”

Regulus hadn’t argued, he’d simply left them to it, mostly because standing in a room with James while he was wearing a formal robe was making his head spin a bit and he didn’t think that he would be able to control himself much longer. He would have to be careful not to drink too much at the wedding, or perhaps he should drink so much that he didn’t remember the evening at all.

“Is it almost time?” Sirius asked.

“Just about,” Harry said. “The Weasleys just arrived.”

“Who else are we waiting on?” Regulus asked.

“I’m not sure.” Harry shrugged, looking a little chagrin.

Regulus walked forward and whispered, “Make sure he doesn’t try to go running through London to blow off steam. He keeps threatening to do it and I’m not sure if he’s joking or not.”

Harry snickered. “I got it.”

Regulus left Sirius and his best man to it, slowly descending the stairs to where he could hear voices spilling from the kitchen. They’d decided to hold the wedding in the courtyard of Grimmauld Place. It wasn’t ideal—especially for Sirius who hated Grimmauld more than anyone—but it was warded to the teeth and if they were going to have any gathering these days, they had to be careful about it.

He briefly stopped inside his bedroom before heading down to greet their guests.

“Kreacher,” he called. Kreacher popped into existence before him. He hadn’t thought that he and Kreacher would ever speak again, but with the way the world had shifted after Dumbledore’s death, he could no longer afford to lose friends. Besides, they’d reached an understanding after Regulus found a little forgiveness.

“Yes, Mr. Regulus,” Kreacher said with a low bow. That was part of their new arrangement. Regulus could tell that Kreacher was still getting used to it.

“Please double-check the wards one last time, and let me know if there is anyone waiting to get through that hasn’t been approved.”

“Of course,” Kreacher said and disappeared.

Regulus sat on the edge of his bed for a moment, reveling in the way his life had changed since the night Albus Dumbledore fell from the Astronomy Tower, slain at the end of Severus Snape’s wand. He’d already planned to leave Hogwarts after that year, and he’d known that Harry wasn’t going to be returning, not with what Regulus planned to do, but those plans felt much more real now that Dumbledore wasn’t there to add a layer of protection.

He wasn’t there to stop them either, but that seemed so far from his thoughts now that the man was dead and buried. They’d held a funeral for the man shortly after his death, Regulus had felt like he was moving through fog the whole time.

The entire school felt like it was in shock, especially with the added news about Draco Malfoy’s death floating around. No one knew what had actually happened to the boy. There were rumors about him joining the Death Eaters or about him attacking Dumbledore and being killed in the process, but there were also rumors about him attacking the Death Eaters that had infiltrated the castle. No one seemed to know that he had let them into the castle.

The only people who knew that Draco was still alive were Regulus, James, Sirius, Remus, and, presumably, Snape. Regulus didn’t know what that last person meant for Draco or his parents’ safety, but for now, he wasn’t thinking about it. Draco was safe, tucked behind new wards set by James and Remus. Not even Harry knew that he was alive.

He didn’t love that he was alone today, it didn’t feel right, but no one could stay with him, not with all of them in the wedding party. Regulus tried not to worry too much. It wasn’t like Draco could get out of the wards anyway.

It wasn’t that he was keeping him prisoner exactly, it was just that Draco was a teenage boy and teenage boys didn’t often have the best decision-making ability. He didn’t want him to get antsy and try to make a run for it without talking to someone first. Sirius called him a control freak, but he didn’t actually try to stop him.

He would go and check on him after the ceremony, just to make sure he was okay.

He headed down the steps finally to greet everyone. It wasn’t going to be a large wedding, they could only afford to invite people that they could trust with their lives, but it still felt like there were more people in Grimmauld Place than there had been in years.

The crowd of redheads were the first to catch his eye, they were all huddled in the doorway to the kitchen, talking loudly to one another. They seemed in surprisingly high spirits given the death that had just occurred a few weeks prior.

“Regulus,” Hermione greeted from behind him, he hadn’t noticed her coming down the hallway. “How are you?” she asked seriously.

He gave her a soft smile, hugging her tightly before stepping back to hold her by the shoulders. “I’m okay,” he replied. He was sure she was asking about Draco’s death, everyone seemed to be walking on eggshells around him, he hadn’t even realized that people thought they were friends. “Thank you for coming.”

“Of course,” Hermione said. “It was lovely for them to invite me.”

“Well, given your participation in bringing me back to life, I think a wedding invitation is the least they can offer.”

She laughed, her face flushing from the praise. “Is Harry already up there?”

“Yes, he’s in the process of calming Sirius.”

Hermione laughed again, a soft tinkly thing, and then a flash of sadness and empathy crossed her face. “He said that Sirius asked him to be his best man. I’m surprised he didn’t ask you.”

Regulus threw his head back in dramatic response. “Oh, please, don’t remind me. Being a best man would be much easier than what he actually asked me to do.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “What did he ask you to do?”

Regulus shook his head. “You’ll see. I think Ron is in there if you wanted to talk to him.” He pointed over his shoulder toward the kitchen.

They hadn’t invited that many of Harry’s friends, although Regulus was sure that most of his year at Hogwarts would have jumped at the opportunity to attend the wedding. Regulus hadn’t gotten much of a chance to talk to any of them before leaving Hogwarts for the last time, and now that he was near Ron and Hermione again, he regretted not taking the opportunity when he had the chance.

He’d received a letter from Parvati and Lavender, the two of them unsteady friends again now that Parvati and Ginny had broken up. At least that was the rumor going around. Regulus hadn’t been there for the official ending of the relationship but it hadn’t been much of a surprise to him. He didn’t think they had all that much in common beyond a general love of arguing.

The last time he’d talked to them had also been the moment he decided to free Kreacher. Parvati, Ginny, and Regulus had been in the library together, only a few weeks before Dumbledore’s death, when Hermione and Lavender decided to join them. It was an odd group. Regulus didn’t even think that Hermione and Lavender spoke to each other, especially

after the Ron debacle, but in the two of them walked, settling at their table like it was any normal day.

Regulus had been trying to finish up some work for classes. He'd basically lost all his desire to do any classwork now that he knew for sure he was going to be leaving, but if he slacked off too much he'd end up in detention and he couldn't afford to lose that time, so he was half-arsing it.

He wasn't paying attention to the quiet whisperings between the girls, not until he heard Hermione's voice in the mix. He only caught the tail end of what was brewing into a massive storm, only cut off by Madam Pince's harsh hush coming from the opposite end of the library.

"It's not about what anyone else wants you to do," Parvati said sharply. "It's about choice, it's about getting to pick. My mum didn't even get the option, but she wants Padma and I to get to choose."

Hermione's face was flushed—they must have been arguing. "But being subservient pushes everything back for all of us."

"Only if we're forced into it," Ginny said. Lavender looked confused, but she was watching Parvati and Ginny argue together with a dark, unhappy look.

Hermione opened her mouth but Pince got there first. They all dropped into silence, but Regulus kept thinking about what they were saying, about the idea of choice. The situation with Kreacher had been weighing on him for months, and not just because Kreacher's actions had inadvertently gotten him killed, but also because for years now Hermione's repeated lectures about house elves had wormed their way into his brain.

He didn't like to think about it. He was starting to believe that he was very much not a good person, not that he'd ever been one for morals or choosing the right side, but Kreacher had been his closest friend for much of his life—he was definitely his oldest friend if he didn't count his brother which he decidedly didn't. It was wrong that he had no choice but to do whatever Regulus said. It wasn't okay.

Ultimately, he'd waited another few days before calling Kreacher to his side, Kreacher had been wailing and apologetic, and Regulus had forgiven him almost instantly. He hadn't realized that he'd already done so long before deciding to talk to Kreacher again. Kreacher had seemed relieved right up until Regulus dropped a bomb on him.

"I've decided to free you," he said without preamble which was in retrospect a bit cruel, but it was the only way to manage it. He just had to get straight to the point. Kreacher dropped to the ground in apologetic tears again, but Regulus shushed him. "Kreacher, I can't go on like this. With your betrayal, I have no way of knowing if you want to stay with us, with me. I can't ever know as long as I own you. You have to make the choice."

Kreacher hadn't understood and the conversation to convince him took over two hours, but eventually, Kreacher weepily accepted the tie Regulus was wearing. After that, they'd

restructured their relationship. Regulus couldn't do anything to help the other house elves, but he could offer Kreacher his freedom, and that would have to be enough.

Hermione was over the moon when he'd told her about it, incapable of keeping it from everyone. When he'd shared that Kreacher had decided to stay on as an employee of the Black family, she'd seemed unsure. It made him feel a pang of guilt that he didn't know what to do with, but once he asked for her help developing a bit of magic that would allow him to call Kreacher whenever he needed him—just as he could when Kreacher belonged to him—she seemed more accepting.

Sirius accepted Kreacher with as much kindness as could be expected, but he didn't complain. Especially once Regulus explained that Kreacher would not be allowed at the new safe house. Sirius didn't actually know about the betrayal, but he seemed more relaxed knowing he wouldn't have to deal with Kreacher once they moved permanently. They were planning to abandon Grimmauld by the end of July.

He greeted McGonagall as he walked to the living room to double-check for more guests. He was surprised that she'd agreed to attend at first, but once Remus clarified that he was the one to invite her, it all made sense. He was sure that Remus was a favorite of McGonagall's. She wasn't the only professor either. Hagrid, Flitwick, Burbage, Slughorn, and Sprout were all in attendance.

"Hello, Mr. Black," she greeted. There were deep circles under her eyes, she looked worn down and tired. She'd been placed as the temporary headmistress of Hogwarts while they prepared for next year and it was clear that that and Dumbledore's death were taking a toll on her. She seemed skinnier than usual, her severe face much more intimidating. He worked not to show his shock on his face.

"Good to see you," he said. "We'll be starting soon, but everyone is gathering in the kitchen."

"So I can hear," she muttered as he passed her.

He checked the living room quickly and then made his way back into the kitchen with everyone else. Despite the small crowd they had invited, the sound coming from the room was so loud that for a moment he couldn't even hear himself think.

He pushed past most of them out to the courtyard. Up until a week ago, the courtyard had been overrun with magical plants that had been left untended for more than a decade. His parents didn't like using the courtyard and over time, Kreacher had stopped upkeep on the space. Regulus had all but forgotten about it until Sirius mentioned needing a venue for his wedding. He'd thought about renting a space, but Regulus thought it was too dangerous. They needed to keep everyone safe and they could only do that if they could control the wards themselves. He wouldn't rely on someone else's magic to protect his family.

Now, the courtyard looked pristine. Kreacher had been exceptionally helpful in cleaning it up and making it presentable for guests. Most of the magical plants had been removed and sent away—Regulus wanted to kill them given that most of them were invasive species, but Remus insisted that they be put to good use—and now the courtyard walls were lined with

beautiful magical flowers and vines. They looked like they'd been growing for years. Blues, purples, pinks, and greens all dancing together as if performing just for them.

Transfigured chairs lined the courtyard floor, all of them facing the archway that Regulus had made. It wasn't much, just a bit of white stone that he'd carved with a little magic, but it fit the space beautifully. Neither Sirius nor Remus had seen the area yet and he could only hope that they would be pleased.

"Should I get everyone seated?" Ron asked suddenly, his voice making Regulus jump. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Regulus replied easily. He was tense, they all were, but he'd done everything he could to make sure there wouldn't be any hiccups. Ron was frowning slightly like he could tell Regulus was overwhelmed. He was dressed in expensive formal robes that Sirius had purchased for him. Regulus was surprised by the choice, but Sirius was insistent that they needed an usher and that Ron was the right choice. "Yes, I think that's a good idea. We should begin soon."

He left Ron to it, hurrying inside and back upstairs. It was almost time.

He checked on Sirius first. He seemed much calmer than he did when Regulus first left. He and Harry were sitting on the end of Sirius's bed whispering quietly to each other. Harry was smiling, his cheeks red like he'd been laughing, and Sirius had a look of reluctant embarrassment on his face like he was telling a humiliating story. Regulus cleared his throat.

"Is it time?" Sirius asked, his face paling instantly.

"Yes," Regulus said, then turned his attention to Harry. "You know what to do?"

Harry nodded, giving Regulus a thumbs-up while he did so.

"Good. I'll meet you downstairs then."

He went to James's room next where Remus had been reading calmly less than an hour ago. He hadn't expected much of a change, but when he opened the door after a quick knock to let them know he was coming, he found Remus with his head in his hands, frantic ramblings coming out of his mouth.

"What is going on?" Regulus asked alarmedly.

James spun around to look at him. "Nothing!" he shouted. Then he took two steps forward so that he could whisper into Regulus's ear. Regulus was instantly overwhelmed by the smell of him, and the heat coming off of his body. It was intoxicating. "We just need five more minutes. I told you he was freaking out."

"I thought you were kidding," Regulus whispered helplessly. James cringed and shook his head. Regulus let out a soft sigh. "Okay, five minutes. I'll wait outside."

He shut the door behind him and leaned against the wall in the hallway. It was dark in the windowless space and for a moment he could imagine it was any other day, but surprisingly,

that offered little comfort to him. Sometimes when he was little and stressed out, he would imagine that it was a day when nothing was planned, when it was a rare day where he got to laze around the house with Sirius, playing games and eating whatever they wanted.

Those days were well behind him now. Even if he wanted to, he wouldn't be able to find a day like that again. After this wedding, there was the ritual to remove Tom Riddle's soul from Harry, the thought of it existing like a permanent blemish on the map laid out in front of him, then after that, he would have to make sure everyone was settled and then he would leave.

He hadn't told them yet, not explicitly, but the moment he knew that they were as safe as they could be and that they had an exit strategy should things go wrong, he was going to go.

They still had to get into the Lestrage vault, and in order to do that, Regulus was going to have to either break into Azkaban to kill two men or hope that Tom Riddle broke them out so he could kill them in an easier setting. Or perhaps break into Gringotts but that seemed far too messy for him. Regardless, murder was ahead of him, and though he assumed that Sirius, Remus, and James knew that's what he would have to do, he didn't want them to think about him like that too deeply.

After they got that Horcrux and the one from Harry was removed, then there was only one left. He just had to destroy it and then he could kill Tom Riddle.

Until Tom Riddle was dead, there would be no rest.

If he even could kill him.

"Okay, we're ready," James said, poking his head out of the doorway right as Regulus was starting to ponder his impending doom. Regulus plastered on a smile as quickly as he could.

"Good. Meet you downstairs."

He hurried back to the kitchen, careful not to think about what he would be leaving behind or about Dumbledore's belief that he would die before successfully ending Tom Riddle. The kitchen was empty now, Ron having successfully moved everyone out in the courtyard and Regulus savored the silence for a moment before he headed through the doorway.

He wasn't prepared for the way they all turned to look at him.

He wished Sirius had just let him be another wedding guest. Not that he was ungrateful to be included, but he was almost certain that Sirius only asked him for his help because he knew both James and Harry would be taking the best man spots and he felt bad. Regulus did not feel that that was necessary, but alas, here he was.

He took his place at the alter quickly, smiling politely at anyone he made eye contact with, and then he carefully touched the charmed Galleon he had in his pocket. It was one of the ones that Hermione had created for Dumbledore's Army, slightly modified so the message could only be read by those it was intended to find. Specifically, Harry and James.

Ready.

The door to the courtyard opened almost immediately. Harry must have been right behind it. They'd already coordinated earlier with Harry and James ensuring that Remus and Sirius didn't meet somewhere in Grimmauld before seeing each other at the altar, just as Sirius had requested. Harry was the first to exit, but Sirius was just behind him.

Regulus didn't know if there was protocol for a wedding ceremony like this, he'd only been to a few pureblood weddings, and each of them was dictated by decorum and family-specific rules.

Everyone stood when they saw Sirius. He looked radiant in his burgundy robes, he looked healthy, as if Azkaban was something that had never happened to him, as if Azkaban never even crossed his mind. He grinned brightly at everyone, nodding once to Regulus as he took his spot in front of him. Light music was already playing in the courtyard from an old record player that Burbage had let him borrow.

Only a few moments passed before the door opened again and James walked out. He didn't look like himself now, they still had to keep up with the glammers, almost no one knew that James was alive, but Regulus could see right through them. He looked like himself to Regulus. He looked handsome.

Regulus put his hands behind his back, digging his nails into his palms to ground himself, as Remus walked through the door. He smiled awkwardly while glancing around, seemingly not noticing Sirius right away, but Sirius gasped like he was the most beautiful creature he'd ever laid eyes on.

Regulus noticed him swaying a bit, and he carefully put a hand on Sirius's shoulder to keep him from falling over. He made eye contact with Harry over Sirius's shoulder and the two of them smiled helplessly at one another.

It was only a few seconds before James and Remus were up at the altar with them, but it felt like an eternity.

When Remus finally looked at Sirius, really looked at him, his eyes filled with tears. He blinked quickly to clear them while Regulus looked away politely, watching as their guests sat.

He took one deep breath—he really wasn't a fan of public speaking—and began talking. He'd memorized what he was supposed to say, a mixture of muggle and magical statements that led up to vows and questions and men becoming husbands. He barely heard the words as he spoke them though. It was only when he got to the vows that he started paying attention.

"Sirius," he prompted. Sirius glanced at him, dragging his eyes away from Remus's face, and looked like he might faint for a second, but then he gritted his teeth like preparing for a fight and started to speak.

"Remus," he said, glancing back at his fiancé. His eyes unfocused for just a second, just long enough to trip him up. He coughed once to clear his throat then started again. "Remus. You once said that friendship had never been enough to describe what we are to each other, but I don't believe that is true anymore. There were so many times in my life when I believed that

I was completely alone, but I was always wrong and it was often my friends that reminded me of that fact.

“My friends were the ones to catch me. And your friendship has always meant more to me than I thought possible. Even when I thought I would never speak to another soul beyond the dementors in Azkaban, it was your friendship that I longed for. I wouldn't have survived this long without you as my friend. No one in the world has ever been as lucky as I have when it comes to friendship.”

James made a choking sound and Regulus glanced over to see him openly sobbing. He pinched his lips together to keep from laughing. It was sweet really.

“The friendship between us is more important than anything, so as your friend, and your lover, I promise to never jeopardize that. I promise to put that above all else. I promise to trust you as my best friend.”

Regulus considered silencing James, just for a moment, his attempts to keep in his crying noises failing miserably, but then he looked around and realized that James wasn't the only one crying. Even Harry looked a bit misty-eyed.

“I promise to make room for you, wherever I am. I promise to hear you when you talk to me. And I promise to love you, as I always have, without conditions.”

Regulus was smiling so hard that his cheeks hurt as he looked over Remus whose mouth was hanging open.

“Remus,” Regulus prompted. Remus blinked hard then shook himself.

“Right,” he whispered to himself. A blush spread across his cheeks. “Sirius.” He swallowed harshly. “When I first tried to write my vows, I tried to fill them with promises about what I would do for you. It's what people do when they love someone, they do things for them. But I could never finish a draft.

“I couldn't help but feel that they fell short of what I truly wanted to say. You see, you never seemed to ask anything of me, not like that. It used to drive me crazy. It used to make me feel like we would never be equals, but I know better now. It wasn't ever about what I could do for you. It was about what I was willing to let you do for me. So here are my promises to you.

“I promise to let you help me, even when it's difficult. I promise to let you in, not just about my feelings, but about my secrets and my schemes as well. I promise to share your bank vault.” His lips twitched slightly like this was some grand inside joke. It must have been because Sirius threw his head back and laughed.

“I promise to let you take care of me. And I promise to take care of you when you need it. I've loved you since I was eleven and I'll love you till the day I die.”

Regulus's chest felt tight, his words felt caught as he tried to speak again. He wasn't expecting to feel choked up over this, but the way they were looking at each other, with so

much love and trust, it made him fill with longing.

He moved through the questions as steadily as he could, hoping no one would notice anything off about him. He doubted anyone was even looking at him with Sirius and Remus there.

He asked Sirius if he took Remus to be his husband, to which Sirius responded with a loud, “Fuck yes!” The guests laughed, Ron loudest of all, but Regulus merely rolled his eyes fondly and asked Remus the same question. He said a simple “Yes.”

“Before we proceed, is there anyone present who has a reason these two shouldn’t be married?” Regulus asked. Sirius had insisted that he include the question, Regulus didn’t know why it was so important, but for a split second he worried that Tonks or, Merlin forbid, Charlie Weasley would just jump up and intervene.

Luckily, Tonks wasn’t in attendance—Regulus didn’t blame her for refusing the invitation though James seemed a bit bummed that she wouldn’t be there—and Charlie seemed more than happy to watch the two of them tie the knot.

“Very well,” Regulus said then pulled out his wand. Remus had told him that in muggle weddings they just kissed to seal the deal, but Regulus had put an end to his half-muggle suggestions right there. Sirius and Remus could kiss all they wanted in their private time, this was a time for magic.

It was an intricate spell, Regulus’s main focus once Sirius asked him to officiate the wedding, because it bound Remus and Sirius’s magic together. Not irrevocably—although variations did exist for that—but it was still enough to affect both of their magical cores. He moved carefully through it, tying golden strings of magic around each of them as they clasped their hands together in the middle.

He felt the moment the spell was complete, the golden string snapping into place and sealing together over both of them. Regulus felt like he could see their very magic in the air, as if it was moving around them, pulsing with their heartbeats. And in the final moment, he glanced over at James and found him staring back with so much intensity that Regulus couldn’t hold his gaze.

the lovers part II.

Chapter Notes

the second half is a bit smutty

Burbage's record player was so loud that the walls of Grimmauld Place were shaking. Regulus was sure that someone must have charmed it to make it so deafening. He didn't mind though. He was feeling pleasantly buzzed having downed a few drinks directly after the wedding ceremony. He'd decided that being so drunk that he could barely walk was the only way to forget the way James had been looking at him.

They'd charmed the living room so that the walls were expanded, allowing more people to fill the space. Sirius had wanted to stay outside in the courtyard after the ceremony and Regulus was sure that he and Remus needed a bit of time to themselves so he'd moved the party indoors.

People were spilling out into the formal dining room and lingering in the kitchen, but Regulus was more than happy to stay in the living room, stuck to the wall like it was the only thing keeping him upright. It might have been, now that he thought about it. He hadn't moved in a while.

He idly watched the guests dance in pairs or groups of three. Some song by The Weird Sisters was playing. He'd never been a fan, but clearly, people were enjoying themselves.

Fleur was currently dancing with Charlie Weasley, both of them snickering at something or other. Bill wasn't far, leaning against another wall with his father, deep in conversation. He still looked a bit rough from the wounds Greyback had left him. Remus said that it would take time for them to fully heal, and even when they did, he would never be without scars. Regulus's body was layered with magical scars, but he was fortunate enough to be able to hide them with a bit of clothing. Bill wasn't so lucky.

He seemed happy though. He was smiling and he kept looking at Fleur with that heavy, love-sick look that people only got when they were truly gone.

Andromeda, Regulus's cousin, and her husband Ted were dancing as well. Their faces were close together and they weren't moving in time with the upbeat song. They were too wrapped up in each other to notice what was or wasn't playing. Regulus had been avoiding Andromeda. Sirius had told him that she was at his funeral. He'd never known her very well, their age difference and her leaving the family when she was a teenager destroyed any ability for them to form a relationship. Regulus had gotten along much better with Narcissa, she was always sweet to him when they were young. Andromeda always seemed too distant to him, and Bellatrix just scared him.

According to Sirius, Andromeda had still believed that Regulus was his son until he'd finally told her who Regulus really was. Regulus wasn't sure how he felt about her knowing his secret, but Sirius was sure they could trust her.

He knew it wasn't right to still feel resentment over her leaving the family, he'd forgiven Sirius for the same thing a long time ago, but he couldn't help the way his feelings festered inside him. When he looked at Andromeda, happy and unbothered, he couldn't help but remember that yawning emptiness he'd felt in his chest that first night Sirius was gone. When he'd laid in his bed staring at the ceiling for hours and hours, waiting for the feeling to leave, knowing it never would.

He dragged his eyes away from Andromeda and Ted. Going down that road wouldn't help him. He needed to let it go.

His eyes landed on Luna and Ginny next. They were spinning in circles, both of them laughing uproariously at their own antics. Regulus had been worried that Ginny would still be hurting from her breakup with Parvati, but she seemed more than happy to be enjoying her time with her friend.

He searched the room for Harry and his friends, but he couldn't find them. If he had to guess they were either in the kitchen, eating as much food as they possibly could, or they were up in Harry's room. He knew that everything that had happened during their sixth year was still weighing on Harry. Dumbledore's death had hit him hard. Not to mention that Regulus still needed to tell him about Draco.

Harry hadn't shown much emotion when he found out that Draco was dead, at least not outwardly, but that didn't mean he wasn't reacting somewhere deep inside. He was curious how Harry would respond to finding out he was alive. However, he wasn't looking forward to what Harry would have to say when he found out that he would be spending the rest of the summer and likely what should have been his seventh year in close proximity to Draco Malfoy. Regulus could already hear the yelling and complaining.

He could only hope that the two of them didn't kill each other. Hopefully, Sirius, Remus, and James would find a way to keep the peace.

As he watched Ginny and Luna, both red-faced and grinning, he wondered what the year ahead would hold for them. And for everyone else in this room. Would Hogwarts be safe now that Dumbledore was dead? He doubted it. Tom Riddle hadn't made a move to take the school yet, but Regulus was sure it was only a matter of time. He'd seen all of Dumbledore's memories of the man, he knew that Tom Riddle was too focused on the school to let it go. Regulus doubted that he would be able to stop himself from going after it.

Not to mention that it would present a stronghold for his side. Not because it was filled with teenagers, they were as useless to him as most of his followers, but because of the magically charged walls that built the fortress. He could run the country from that castle.

So what did that mean for all the students going back there? How could they hope to be safe in such a dangerous place? And what about Severus? Would he try to come back to school to

teach? Only a handful of people knew that Severus was the one to kill Dumbledore and the two actual witnesses couldn't testify against him.

Even McGonagall didn't know and she was supposed to take over as Headmistress.

It was all so complicated, far more complicated than Regulus could have imagined, and what was worse was that Regulus couldn't help any of them now. He was going to be out in the world doing his best to kill Tom Riddle. That would help them eventually, but as the autumn term grew closer every passing minute, each of them would be dragged deeper into a game of chess so intricate that they may all end up sacrificial pawns before the war was won.

He worried for them. Especially Hermione. The muggleborns would be in far more danger than the purebloods and half-bloods. They may even reach a point where muggleborns are not allowed back inside the Hogwarts walls. He would have to watch the news over the coming weeks so he could try and help her and the other muggleborns he knew. He wished he had a way to get them all out of the country, but he just didn't have the resources, and he was sure the Ministry would be paying close attention.

"Hey, have you seen Harry?" James's words coincided with a crack of thunder. Regulus startled, spilling his half-full glass of firewhiskey down the front of his dress robes.

"Is it storming?" Regulus asked, disoriented and suddenly feeling much more drunk than he felt a moment ago.

James put a hand on his back like he was trying to steady him. Regulus didn't realize he was at risk of falling. He might not have been, he couldn't tell. He fought the childish desire to shake off James's hand.

"What did you ask me?" Regulus said after a beat. The warm hand on his lower back was unreasonably distracting. Honestly, he wasn't a teenager anymore. Not mentally at least. He needed to get a grip.

"Where's Harry? I haven't seen him in a while."

"Where was he last?" Regulus asked.

"In the kitchen. I think I saw him and Ron stealing like fourteen Yorkshire puddings." Just as Regulus suspected. "But they left and now I don't know where they went. The professors are all getting drunk in the dining room."

The music which had seemed pleasantly loud a moment ago now seemed far too noisy.

"Come on," he said, setting down his glass and hurrying out of the room. James's hand dropped from his back, clearing the fog from Regulus's head. He could feel James following him out of the room, but he didn't look back.

He skirted around people as he made his way toward the stairs. Sirius and Remus still weren't anywhere in sight. They might have still been outside but surely the rain would force them indoors. Regulus wasn't going to wait around for them either way, they wouldn't know where

Harry was, and he was well passed the point of wanting to watch them stare longingly into each other's eyes. They slipped around Fred and George who were bent together whispering furiously. They were up to no good. Of that much, Regulus was certain.

He climbed the stairs as quickly as he could, the world spinning slightly. He'd meant to get drunk, but now that he was, he wished he could undo it—if only to make walking a bit easier.

Harry's room was two floors up and it took him longer than it should to get up there, but James was patient, allowing him to climb at his own pace, waiting when he had to lean against the wall for support. He knocked twice on Harry's door when he arrived at it.

"Uh, don't come in," Harry called after a beat. He sounded uncertain, almost like he was asking a question rather than making a demand. He heard Ron whispering right after Harry spoke but he couldn't make out what he was saying.

"What could they possibly be up to in there?" James asked.

Regulus had no idea, although if they didn't want anyone to come in, it was likely something they shouldn't be doing.

"Harry," Regulus called.

"Just a minute," Harry replied after another short pause. The sound of thunder rattled the walls again. The storm must have been raging outside. Regulus waited to see if Harry would open the door, but when that didn't happen, he gave up.

"Okay, I'm coming in," Regulus said.

"Wait, don't—" The door was fully opened before Harry could finish his sentence. Regulus wasn't sure what he was trying to hide at first, it just looked like he and Ron were standing in the center of the bedroom, but then he heard the shuffling of little paws and noticed an otter trying to hurry under the bed.

"What was that?" Regulus said, slurring his words slightly.

"Are you drunk?" Harry asked.

"Did you sneak an animal in here?" James asked, coming up to stand right behind Regulus. So close that Regulus could smell him. His thoughts clouded.

"Erm, not exactly," Ron said. Harry elbowed him. "What?" he said, throwing his arms out as he looked at Harry. "Do you think he's going to be mad?"

"I don't know," Harry whispered back.

"Please explain what is going on," Regulus said sternly. His words slurred again ruining his attempt at seriousness.

“Well, see, we weren’t planning to do this today,” Harry mumbled, avoiding eye contact as he spoke, “but then the rain started and I didn’t know when I would see both of them again, so I just thought... Well, if something went wrong, it’s not like I couldn’t have come to get you.”

“Something went wrong?” James whispered curiously.

“Oh Merlin,” Regulus said, realization dawning on him. He rubbed his eyes tiredly. He really wished he was sober for this. “Is that Hermione?”

Both Harry and Ron cringed, but Ron was the one to nod.

If someone had asked Sirius where all of his guests had gone and when they had left, he wouldn’t have been able to answer. The moment he was married to Remus, he lost all ability to take in his surroundings. He forgot about James and Harry standing at the altar with them, he forgot about Regulus standing between them, and he instantly forgot about all of the people watching them.

Remus was finally his, he finally had him in the way he’d always dreamed, even before he knew he could marry a man. And more importantly—*most* importantly—Sirius was Remus’s. He’d always wanted to belong to someone, to have a place that was perfectly made for him, and he knew now that that was right next to Remus.

Or pulled up against his chest, as he was right now.

They were kissing, but Sirius kept breaking into uncontrollable laughter, so Remus kept having to kiss down his neck just to maintain contact with him. The third time it happened, Remus finally pulled away enough to speak.

“What’s so funny?” Remus asked. Sirius had his eyes closed, but he could feel Remus’s breath as he spoke. He could also hear the smile in his words, the best sound in the world he was sure.

“I just can’t believe this is actually happening,” Sirius answered honestly. “I must be dreaming.”

“I don’t feel real enough for you?” Remus chuckled.

“Definitely not,” Sirius said, finally opening his eyes. “I think I need to feel you a bit *more*.” They were already chest to chest, nearly as close as they could go without taking off their clothes, but Sirius squeezed him closer regardless.

“That was terrible,” Remus said, though he laughed as he spoke.

Sirius shrugged. “So you found out my terrible secret. Sometimes my jokes suck. It’s too late now, you’re already stuck with me.”

“Please.” Remus rolled his eyes. “I’ve always known about your awful humor.”

Sirius sighed dramatically. “I guess you know it all then, every secret I have.”

Remus grinned, his eyes crinkling, but one side of his lip twitched like something was bothering him.

“What is it?” Sirius asked instantly.

“Nothing.”

Sirius only stared. They’d just gotten married, surely Remus didn’t have anything to say that could derail it. Remus frowned though, an expression like shame crossing over his features.

“What?” Sirius asked, a tad more intensely.

“There is something I haven’t told you yet,” Remus said quietly.

“Okay,” Sirius replied. “Is it bad?”

“It’s pretty bad.”

“Okay,” Sirius said again, almost like he was preparing himself. “Tell me.”

“It’s about the night Dumbledore died,” Remus started to say. Instantly, Sirius’s thoughts ran wild. Had he done something horrible? Tonks was there, did it have to do with her? Did he kiss her? “You know how Fenrir died?”

Sirius’s manic thoughts vanished in an instant. “Yes, I know. You said you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s still true.”

Sirius’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead. He’d wanted to know how Remus was feeling about Fenrir Greyback’s death. He’d been a monster looming in the shadows for his entire life, and he was such a pivotal part of the werewolves’ loyalty to Voldemort. It was impossible for Remus to feel nothing, but he’d seemed so shocked that night that Sirius hadn’t pushed him. Despite how much he wanted to know, it didn’t feel like his place to beg for secrets.

The version of him that existed before Azkaban would have demanded to know, he would have followed Remus around the house until he opened up, but now he just let it drop. It wasn’t easy, but if it meant that Remus was more comfortable, then he was willing to do it.

He hadn’t expected him to bring it up right after their wedding though.

“You don’t have to.”

Remus shook his head. “You should know. I want you to know.”

“All right,” Sirius said uncertainly. He gripped Remus a little tighter like he might lose him if he let go. Would that always be a part of their lives? Would he always be worried about losing Remus?

“When they told us that he was dead in the Hospital Wing,” he said, staring far over Sirius’s shoulder like he was still at Hogwarts, reliving the moment, “I already knew.”

Sirius was confused. “Okay,” he said once again, prompting Remus to explain.

“I was there when he died.”

“Oh,” Sirius breathed. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” Remus asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

Sirius shrugged halfheartedly. “Watching someone die, even someone as horrible as Greyback, isn’t fun.”

“I didn’t just watch him die,” Remus said urgently, his grip on Sirius growing a bit tighter, almost painful. “I—” He closed his eyes like he couldn’t bear to look at Sirius as the next words left his mouth. “I killed him.”

Sirius waited for him to continue, but he found that he wasn’t surprised. Looking back it made more sense that Remus was the reason Greyback didn’t make it out of that fight. It wasn’t like any of the other Aurors and Order members were the killing type. Not that Remus was the killing type either, but Greyback was a special case.

“I suffocated him. I looked him in the eyes as I did it. I watched him die.”

“Oh, Remus,” Sirius said softly, placing a soft kiss against Remus’s cheek. He could already feel his stubble growing in and it scratched against his lips. He wondered if it would cause a rash between his legs if Remus stayed down there long enough. The thought shocked him at first, Remus had just confessed to murder for Godric’s sake, but then he kept picturing soft, sweater-wearing Remus staring down the man who had hurt him as a child, he saw him watching that man die and he was instantly hard.

“Are you hard?” Remus said redundantly. Honestly, it was like he didn’t even know Sirius.

“Did you expect me to be upset with you?” Sirius said rather than answering. It wasn’t like he was trying to hide how hard he was. Even if he was, the breathiness of his words would have given him away.

He searched Sirius’s face. “I’m a murderer,” Remus said dryly.

“So am I,” Sirius replied. “I killed Bellatrix.”

Remus stared at him for a long minute. Sirius didn’t say anything, he just waited, subtly rubbing his hard cock against Remus’s hip, trying to get some relief.

“Is me being a murderer turning you on?” Remus asked. Surprisingly, he didn’t sound horrified, he sounded entertained, interested, *hungry*.

“Everything about you turns me on,” Sirius said in a low voice.

If he could have bottled the way Remus was looking at him, he would have. He would have kept it on his shelf for the rest of his life, just so he could look at it and remember, just so he could bathe in it. Remus pulled off his clothes like he was an animal, he pushed into Sirius roughly, and he didn't stop even when a storm began to swarm around them.

Sirius didn't remember his wedding guests. It was only Remus in his thoughts, in his memories. It was only ever Remus.

the empress.

“Let us discuss your options, Draco,” Dumbledore said, eerily calm. He looked run-ragged, but he wasn't fazed.

“My options! I'm standing here with a wand — I'm going to kill you—” Draco said frantically, waving his wand around like a madman.

Dumbledore was responding to him, but Harry couldn't hear him. It was like his ears were full of cotton. He was standing right next to Dumbledore, right beside him, but Draco wouldn't look at him. It was like he didn't know he was there.

“I haven't got any options,” Draco said, his face paling even further from its usual stark whiteness. “I've got to do it! He'll kill me! He'll kill my whole family!”

They kept arguing, Harry wanted them to stop. Didn't they know this was wrong? Draco shouldn't be pointing his wand at Dumbledore, his hand shaking so badly that he could barely keep a grip on it, and Dumbledore shouldn't be responding like they were having a regular conversation.

“Stop! Please, stop!” Harry tried to say, but no words would leave his mouth.

“No, Draco.” Dumbledore's voice was booming. Not this again, Harry thought. He remembered now, he'd seen this before. “Avada Kedavra!” Dumbledore killed him with a flick of his wand, no emotion in his voice, and Draco froze, his unseeing eyes wide with panic. Harry dashed forward just in time to watch him fall to the floor. He never got there in time to catch him.

Harry woke with a start. His heart was pounding his chest, sweat drenching his pajamas and the pillow beneath him. This was ridiculous, it was the third time this week that he'd had the same dream. Why did it keep happening? He didn't care about Malfoy, he never had.

Okay, so it was a small shock when Harry found out Malfoy had died. No, shock was too intense of a word. It was a tiny surprise, an odd occurrence, a small deviation from his regularly scheduled programming. Nothing *special* exactly, just odd. That's it.

He wasn't dwelling on it. He wasn't even thinking about it.

He was just wondering, that was all. A student died inside Hogwarts, anyone was bound to wonder what happened. He wasn't overly focused on what had happened to Malfoy, not more than any of his friends.

He groaned, rolling over onto his front and digging his face into his spare pillow, the one that had escaped a night of nightmare sweats. He kept doing this. Every few hours, maybe even every few minutes, he would start thinking about how he wasn't thinking about Malfoy and before he knew it he'd lost half an hour to not thinking about Draco Malfoy. He was driving himself insane.

Harry had tried once to ask if Regulus knew what happened to him, but Regulus had fled the room so quickly that someone might have assumed Regulus was responsible for Malfoy's murder.

His murder.

The thought made his stomach twist dangerously, threatening to force bile up his throat. He didn't care about Malfoy, but murder? The murder of a teenager, someone his age? That was something to be concerned about. He threw himself out of bed. He couldn't do anything about Malfoy's death, and it seemed that he couldn't do anything about his need to not think about it for hours on end.

It'll be better after the ritual, he told himself soothingly. That's the only reason he was really ruminating on it. Malfoy had been the one to quiet all the nonsense that was happening in his head. Sure, it was an unfortunate incident, one he hadn't hoped to repeat, but he must feel grateful to him somewhere deep inside. *Really* deep. Unseen.

He dug his nails into his palms until they stung. He was doing it again. Thinking about Draco Malfoy.

He needed to get a hobby.

"Did you hear that Charity's house was broken into?" he heard Remus say as he descended the stairs and headed into the kitchen.

"Burbage?" Regulus responded. He sounded worried. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine, it happened the night of the wedding. Although, if she hadn't been here..."

"I should write to her," Regulus said, already standing from the kitchen table as Harry took his seat. "She needs to be careful. A muggle studies professor is exactly the kind of target that—well, I'm going to write her." He was out of the room before Harry could even get a good look at him.

"He's going to work himself into an early grave if he keeps going like that," Sirius said. He was sitting next to Remus on the opposite of the table from Harry, leaning heavily against Remus's shoulder like he wasn't quite ready to be awake that morning. It was nearly ten, but Sirius had apparently never been an early riser.

"You shouldn't joke about that," James admonished lightly. He was sitting at the head of the table, bent over his plate of toast and eggs.

Sirius shrugged, yawning so wide that it looked like he'd unhinged his jaw.

"You're up early," Remus said to Harry.

"It's ten," Harry replied, stretching to reach the plate of bacon that sat just out of reach. Remus flicked his pointer finger, scooting it closer. "Thanks."

"It's summer vacation, I would expect you to sleep late."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know," he replied, doing his best not to sound like a sullen teenager unwilling to explain what had woken him.

Remus gave him a polite smile and thankfully didn't push. He still had a knowing look in his eyes like he could tell there was something more Regulus wasn't saying.

"What's the plan for today?" Sometimes changing the subject was the only option.

"I don't know," Remus said, jostling his shoulder to draw Sirius's attention. Sirius grunted like he'd fallen back asleep and had just been shaken awake.

"Huh?"

"What are we doing today?" James asked Sirius. He had circles under his eyes like something was eating at him, Harry couldn't be sure what it was. No one ever told him anything.

"Oh," Sirius said, blinking blearily and swallowing down half his tea in one gulp. He seemed more awake after that. "We have the ritual, the last test run."

"The last one?" Harry asked. He knew they were getting close, but the urgent need to get Voldemort out of his head felt more pressing with every day that passed.

"Yep," Sirius replied, grinning at him. His hair was sticking up in all directions, it always looked insane in the morning. It had been getting progressively worse since he married Remus. Harry did his best not to think about why. "I thought maybe James could help me this time."

Harry didn't understand the significance of this, but James's head snapped up at the mention of his name. His eyes widened behind his glasses making him look like a deer caught in headlights.

"What? Really?" James asked. Harry couldn't tell if the emotion in his voice was fear or excitement. Sometimes he wondered how people could say he was like his father. Though they looked similar, Harry had never met anyone he struggled to read more.

"If you want," Sirius said, looking almost shy. Harry watched them curiously, glancing at Remus to hopefully get an explanation, but Remus just looked content, watching Sirius with a small smile. He looked pale today, more pale than usual, and Harry wondered how close they were to the next full.

"Yeah," James breathed. "Yeah, that would be amazing."

They talked idly through breakfast, but once they were all finished eating they went their separate ways. Sirius and James headed upstairs to prepare for the ritual while Remus headed toward the library, he was busy researching something, but Harry didn't know what. Regulus was somewhere else in the house presumably, but Harry wasn't sure where.

Things with Regulus had been weird, but Harry couldn't figure out why. He felt like Regulus was avoiding him. Even the night when Harry had helped Ron and Hermione become

animagi, Regulus had just seemed exasperated, but he hadn't stuck around to lecture Harry after helping Ron and Hermione through their transformation.

James had been thrilled. Harry had told him about his own animagus form while they were exchanging letters and he'd seemed beyond excited that Harry had managed it on his own. Even when Harry confessed that Regulus had done most of the work, James was still enthralled.

He seemed even more interested in the forms of Ron and Hermione—a Jack Russel Terrier and an otter respectively, the same as their patronuses—and he'd specifically taken an interest in Ron's, claiming that he already had one best friend that was a dog animagus, but that he could always use another one.

Ron loved it, laughing happily with James. Harry was a bit embarrassed, but he supposed that was a rite of passage: being embarrassed by his father. A rite of passage he never thought he'd have the ability to cross. He supposed he should be grateful.

The only time Regulus smiled was when Ron and James were laughing together. That was also weird. Regulus and James were being *weird*. Which was bad, to begin with, given that Regulus was...whatever he was to Harry and James was his actual father, the man who was supposed to be in love with his mum once upon a time. It was weird, and Harry really didn't enjoy thinking about it.

He spent the day alone, as he'd been spending most of his days since Ron had returned to the burrow and Hermione had left to spend the summer with her muggle parents. He wrote to them often, sometimes including letters for Luna and Neville as well. He wouldn't typically write to them, but he was bored enough that it seemed like a good idea.

He might have even sunk down to working on schoolwork if he had any to work on. They hadn't sent out any school stuff for seventh year yet, so he wasn't actually sure what he needed to do.

He resigned himself to testing spells he already knew and practicing turning into a crow and back as fast as he could. He was almost to the point where he could change mid-jump and start flying instantly. He was in the process of climbing back onto his bed to jump off when a knock at the door interrupted him.

"Yeah?" he called.

"Can I come in?" James's muffled voice carried an unspoken tentativeness that made Harry want to impulsively say no. He shook off the feeling, jumping to the floor with a loud *thunk*.

"Sure." James opened the door slowly, peeking in and looking around curiously. Harry wasn't going to tell him what the noise was if he wasn't going to ask. He seemed to accept that and kept his question to himself. "What's up?"

Harry took a seat at his desk, turning the chair so that it was facing his bed. It was the largest bed he'd ever slept in, although he wasn't sure that was saying much given that didn't sleep in a real bed until he went to Hogwarts for the first time. James sat on the edge of it like he'd

done with all the beds in his life. They were so different. Harry tried not to hold it against him, and he sort of hated himself when he failed to do so.

“I wanted to give you something, just in case.”

“In case of what?” Harry asked sharply. James was talking in that tentative voice adults used when they didn’t want to tell you something.

“This ritual, I’m not sure how safe it is. I’m glad Sirius is going to do one more test run with me before you have to go through it. I trust him, but in case it goes wrong, I’m hoping it happens to me and not you.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “You think it might kill you?” He didn’t like how panicked he sounded.

“I don’t know,” James said, throwing his hands up in surrender. “I’m sure it won’t, but just in case—I—just in case.”

Harry rolled his eyes, agitation itching at his skin. He was so quick to anger these days, it made him feel sick to his stomach. “Stop saying that,” he snapped.

“Right,” James said quickly. He shook his head rapidly, his curls flopping around into his eyes before he brushed them out of his face. “Sorry. Listen, I just wanted to give you this.”

He reached into his back pocket—the denim he was wearing looked muggle-made and Harry couldn’t help but wonder where he’d gotten them—and pulled out a small black journal. For a moment it looked like Tom Riddle’s diary, the object that had possessed and nearly killed Regulus. Harry had to work to keep himself from jumping away in disgust.

“It belonged to Lily,” James said, unaware of the internal reaction Harry was having.

“What?” Harry said quietly, slowly reaching out to take the journal from James’s hands. James let it go with a frown. Harry was almost afraid to open it.

“When we were living in the cottage in Godric’s Hollow, we couldn’t see almost anyone. Only a few people knew where we were and they couldn’t visit very often. It was lonely with just the three of us, but Lily always had a way to stay positive. Remus gave her this empty journal for her birthday one year, and she started writing her...”

His voice cut off with a choke like he was trying not to cry. Harry was careful not to look at him. James cleared his throat after a second. Harry still hadn’t opened the journal, though he stared down at the cover like he was trying to bore a hole into it.

“Her goals,” James finally said. “Her dreams. She wanted to travel, after the war. She’d always felt too cooped up, said that if she had the freedom she would go everywhere, but these are the places she wanted to start with.”

“She wanted to travel?” Harry repeated. “Why didn’t anyone tell me that?”

“I don’t think anymore knew besides me. I think she thought it was a pipe dream.” He swallowed harshly. “I guess it was.” Harry could see him covering his mouth out of the corner of his eye. He tried not to look directly at him, it felt rude when he was getting this upset. Not that Harry was unmoved, but his grief over losing his mother had been buried deep beneath all the other things he’d been faced with in life.

Now, he mostly felt a hunger for knowledge, a desire to know every little thing about her. The journal in his hands was a huge thing and he didn’t take James’s action in giving it to him lightly.

“Where was it?” he whispered.

James sounded like he was barely holding it together when he said, “It was hidden pretty well in the cottage, no one knew it was there besides me.”

“Oh,” Harry said quietly, the word punching out of him. “Thank you. Ja—Dad. I really appreciate it.”

James nodded. “Anything for you.” He said it easily like it was something he was used to saying, like it was something he said to Harry when he was a baby. Harry got up and sat next to him, pulling his father into a hug before he could get embarrassed and stop himself. James hugged him back fiercely in a nearly painful grip. For once Harry didn’t mind.

It wasn't long before Sirius came to get James for the ritual, and after that, Harry locked his door so he could start going through the journal. The first couple of entries read like a diary, all about the new cottage and discovering she was pregnant. She was very close to Sirius, that much was obvious right from the beginning. She talked about him almost more than she talked about James. She clearly loved Remus and Peter as well. It was odd to see them through her eyes.

After a while, the diary entries stopped, replaced with lists and ideas.

Egypt? Somewhere in Egypt. I think they have a magical school there. I know I read about it. Check with Remus to see if he knows.

All of the entries read like that, as if she was just making notes and to-do lists for herself. They were conversational and by the end of the night, he felt like he could hear her voice through her words. He wondered what it was like to talk to her, to sit in a room with her and have a conversation. It felt strange that that was what he wanted most.

She mentioned several places that she most wanted to take Harry specifically and every time he read his own name, he felt his chest grow tight.

He didn’t leave his room for dinner that night, he’d spent the entire evening trying not to cry and when he eventually lost that battle, he was unwilling to go out and face the rest of his family. He would see them in the morning anyway.

It was only when he woke up to the sunrise that he remembered the ritual that James and Sirius had done the day before. He’d been afraid, and Harry had just brushed him off. What

was *wrong* with him? He jumped out of bed, throwing on a t-shirt as he went, and hurried to James's room. He was planning to barge in without knocking but he didn't have to because right as he approached the door, Remus exited.

"Oh, Harry. There you are. We missed you at dinner last night."

"Sorry," Harry said instantly. "I wasn't feeling well."

Remus frowned. "Are you all right?"

"What?" Harry asked dazedly, before remembering what he'd just said. "Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Is James—" He pointed toward the door that Remus was still in the process of exiting.

"He's fine." Relief rushed through Harry, he hadn't expected to feel so worried. He should have checked the night before. He was so selfish. "He'll be out for a day or two, it's taxing on the body, but then he should be fine."

"And Sirius?" Harry asked. He hadn't asked about him a single time, but he hadn't known that he needed to. He didn't realize it was dangerous. He felt foolish though, selfish again.

"He's okay too. Are you sure you're okay? You look a bit feverish."

"I'm fine," Harry said quickly. "Really. I was just worried." Remus's face softened as a flush crossed Harry's face.

"They're both okay. You don't have to worry. Sirius has had a lot of practice, he won't let anything happen to you."

"I know," Harry said, although he didn't. Not really. He trusted Sirius but magic could be unpredictable, he knew that better than anyone.

Remus watched him for a long moment then finally closed James's door behind him. "Why don't I make you some breakfast?"

"Okay," Harry said quietly. He also felt the need to whisper in the hallways of Grimmauld Place. Sometimes it seemed like they were in a library or a mausoleum. Remus started walking down the steps, so Harry followed. "Where is Regulus?"

"He went out to run an errand," Remus replied.

"What errand?" Regulus had been leaving the house more and more recently. Harry never knew where he was going and he'd given up asking directly when Regulus refused to give anything but vague replies. Harry didn't even know if he was doing it on purpose, he always just seemed distracted.

Remus's shoulder twitched when he asked though. Harry was sure they were hiding something from him. "It's not important." He was even *more* sure now. Remus never brushed him off like that.

“If it’s not important, then why won’t anyone tell me?” he snapped, the words coming out harsher than he’d intended them to be.

Remus turned to look at him when he reached the bottom of the staircase, his eyebrows halfway up his forehead. Harry flushed with shame. He was always flushing, he wondered if Remus would ask if he was feverish again.

“We’re just trying to keep everyone safe. We’ll tell you when it’s time,” Remus said.

Harry didn’t want to throw a fit, he wasn’t a little kid for Merlin’s sake, but this was getting ridiculous. “You guys are always saying that,” he whined. “Do you not trust me? Is that why no one will tell me things?”

“Harry,” Remus said quietly, taking a half step forward.

“Just tell me the truth,” Harry urged. His heart was starting to speed up, he knew he was getting overly emotional about this, but now that it had started he didn’t feel like he could stop it.

“Harry,” Regulus said suddenly, startling both Remus and Harry.

“You’re back?” Harry asked. Regulus was standing in the kitchen doorway. He looked tired, his cheeks sunken in like he hadn’t been eating well. Harry wasn’t sure that he’d ever known a Regulus that wasn’t stressed, but this was taking it to a new level.

“You’re right, I am keeping things from you,” Regulus said matter of factly. His eyes slid to Remus for a split second before settling back on Harry’s face. “It’s not because we don’t trust you. It’s because someone other than the people in this house is in danger. I know you want to be told everything, and usually, I would tell you what I could, but where I’ve been going—it’s not something I can share yet.”

Harry frowned deeply, unsatisfied by the explanation.

“But—” Regulus said, already interrupting whatever Harry was thinking about saying “—I will answer any questions you have if it doesn’t put anyone else in danger.”

Harry bit his bottom lip so hard that he nearly drew blood. He wasn’t sure why he felt so worked up all of a sudden, but if Regulus was giving him an opportunity to ask questions then wasn’t going to throw it away.

“Is the ritual dangerous?” Harry asked.

Regulus sighed. “Let’s go in the kitchen. Remus, are you cooking?”

“Yeah, I’ll cook,” Remus said, patting Regulus on the side of his arm as he passed him. Harry followed them into the kitchen uncertainly, but Regulus only pulled out a chair for him and sat across the table.

“Yes,” he said once they were seated. “The ritual is dangerous. It could kill you if you and Sirius are not careful.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“I thought you might agonize over it and that would ruin your sixth year. I wanted you to enjoy your time with your friends, not worry about something you’d have to do after the year ended.”

Harry’s frown got even deeper. There was something unspoken in Regulus’s words that he didn’t appreciate.

“What’s going to happen seventh year? You’re talking like this was my last year.”

Regulus didn’t frown, but his nostrils flared like he wasn’t prepared for that question. “You won’t be able to go back.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open in shock even as he realized that this was always coming. It was like he already knew.

“Now that Dumbledore is dead, we can’t guarantee that Hogwarts is safe. Tom is going to be coming after you. There is no other way to keep you safe.”

“So I won’t get to see my friends again?” Harry asked quietly.

“I want you to be able to see them again, but I can’t guarantee that you will.”

“Why not?” Harry said, whined really. He needed to stop whining like that.

“Because I can’t tell you how long it will take to kill Tom Riddle. And—” he took a deep breath “—I don’t know how long you’ll be able to stay in the country, and if you’ll ever be able to come back.”

“*Stay in the country?* Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately,” Regulus said regretfully.

“No, no! This is ridiculous. I mean if I’m in danger, then my friends are too.”

Regulus was already shaking his head before Harry finished speaking. “They’re not. You’re the one Tom is after, you’re in far more danger than them. And frankly, you’re the one that matters to me. The only thing I can do for them is try and win the war.”

“The only thing—wait, what? You’re talking like you’re going to be the one to kill Voldemort.”

Regulus winced, but his resoluteness didn’t falter. “Who else is going to do it?”

“No! This is crazy!” Harry shouted. “You can’t go after Voldemort. He’ll kill you before you can kill him.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” Regulus muttered. “Harry, please calm down. I know it’s not ideal, but someone has to go after him.”

“Then get the Order to do it,” Harry said. He was having trouble breathing a bit, but he dug his nails into his palms and that seemed to help him. He was starting to develop bruises from where he kept doing that.

“Who do you think the Order is?” Remus asked gently, abandoning the stove to join their conversation. “There aren’t that many of us, and Regulus is better prepared than most. He knew the man during the first war.”

“Yeah, he was killed by him,” Harry said unhappily. “That hardly makes him the best person to take him down.”

Remus’s lips twitched as Regulus dropped his head to the table with a clunk. “Who else would you suggest?”

“I don’t know! But it can’t be Regulus.”

“Sirius then?” Remus asked.

“No, no one in this house! Stop laughing, I can tell that you’re mocking me,” Harry snapped as Remus’s sober face dropped into snickers. Even Regulus’s shoulders were shaking. “This is serious.”

“I’m pretty sure you already nixed him from the list,” Regulus mumbled against the table.

“Oh, for the love of—” He made to stand up but Remus stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“We’re just teasing,” Remus said softly, the laughter dropping away. “We all know how dangerous this is, don’t think that Regulus has taken this on lightly. He hasn’t. But we all want you to be safe, and the bottom line is you just won’t be until Voldemort is gone.”

Harry felt like he’d been kicked. Although he already knew that, the knowledge that it was on Regulus’s shoulders felt daunting.

“I just want us all to stay together,” he said sullenly. Regulus lifted his head, his eyes softening.

“I know,” Regulus said. “I want that too. It’s not that I want to leave you.”

Harry blew out a breath. He felt like everything was crashing down around him. Or maybe that it already had and he’d been too focused on his own life to notice it falling to pieces. Regulus would be gone, he wouldn’t be going back to Hogwarts, and he didn’t know what the future held anymore. It felt like everything was ruined.

“Do you have any other questions?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said with a shrug. “Do I have to ask them now?”

Regulus laughed. “No, you can ask them whenever you want.”

Harry chewed on his cheek thoughtfully. "When am I going to do the ritual?"

Regulus looked over at Remus who tilted his head in thought. "Probably in a few days. That's when Sirius will be ready. After that, it's up to you. Whenever you're ready."

"Will you explain it to me? Before I do it, I mean."

"Yes, of course," Regulus said. "I can explain it to you now if you want." Harry nodded. Now that he knew danger might be waiting for him, he needed it described in detail. It was the only way he'd be able to sleep that night.

The next few days dragged on as they waited for the ritual. Harry wanted to do it the moment Sirius was able to. He didn't like waiting. Remus left right after breakfast that first morning, saying he'd be back in a few days, and Regulus had been busy with whatever he was doing, so Harry was on his own again. His friends wrote back a few times, and he was always quick to reply to them, but that was about it.

Mostly he dwelled, which seemed to be his new favorite pastime. Not so much on Malfoy, although that was still there, unfortunately, but on Regulus and the danger he faced.

When Sirius was finally awake, though still resting in bed for one final day, Harry brought up a tray of food for him. Regulus had made it and although it didn't look as good as what Remus usually made, Sirius still lit up when he saw it.

"Did Reggie make this?" Sirius asked, pushing himself up so that he was sitting against his pillows.

"How did you know that?" Harry set the tray over Sirius's stretched-out legs.

Sirius shrugged. "I can always tell," he said. "What's up with you?"

"What do you mean?" Harry said, pulling the seat that was up against the wall so that he could sit right next to Sirius. Sirius grinned at him.

"You have this look on your face like you're about to deliver bad news. No one died while I was sleeping, did they?" Sirius raised an eyebrow at him, taking a huge bite of burnt toast.

"No," Harry said with a small laugh. Sirius nudged him with his foot, Harry hadn't even noticed him stick it out from under the blanket. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Yeah?" Sirius said around a mouthful of food. "Go on then."

Harry took a steadying breath. "I don't think that Regulus should go alone."

Sirius nearly choked on his food, he had to sip from the glass of pumpkin juice to swallow. "What?"

"I know he's going to fight Voldemort and I don't think he should go alone."

"Harry—"

“Don’t,” Harry said before Sirius could say whatever he was going to say. “It’s too much to go alone. Someone needs to go with him.” Sirius’s eyebrows furrowed so deeply that the line between them looked like it was tattooed into his forehead. “You don’t have to agree right now, but just think about it. He’ll listen to you.”

“He listens to you too,” Sirius said.

“Not about this,” Harry said. Sirius gazed at him thoughtfully, but in the end, he didn’t respond. They changed the subject a moment later and fell into easy conversation, but Harry could tell that the thoughtful look didn’t leave Sirius’s face the entire time.

the empress part II.

Chapter Notes

did i cry writing this? yes. yes, i did.

Harry wouldn't say that he was nervous about the ritual, not exactly, but he had felt a knot of tension at the base of his spine for a few days leading up to it. He knew what to expect for the most part, Regulus had explained each line of the ritual to him, but living through something and hearing about it were very different things.

It had taken a few days for Sirius to feel well enough to complete the ritual, even after he wasn't bedridden, and Harry had felt disgruntled at being made to wait for something he'd already been building up to in his mind.

He found that he wanted to ask James about it, if only to hear what he'd seen—Regulus had said that they always saw something, but they wouldn't say what—but James was nowhere to be found. The one time Harry had worked up the courage to ask about him, Regulus had done something very odd with his face and said that James just needed time.

“What did he see?” Harry had asked.

Regulus didn't look at him, but his shoulders tightened. “He hasn't said, so I don't know.”

Harry wasn't sure that he believed him, not until he asked Sirius the same question. “That's for James to talk about,” Sirius had said. “It's a very personal thing and for James... It was different, I guess. Unexpected.”

“So it's different every time?”

Sirius shook his head. “Not always, but for James it was different.”

Harry narrowed his eyes but let Sirius skirt away without questioning him further. He didn't know why they couldn't talk about what they'd seen, if it was magic keeping their tongues tied, or if it was something they were specifically keeping from him.

On the morning of the ritual, Remus made them all breakfast. So much food was spread around the table that it looked like they were preparing to feed an army rather than five people. James didn't come out of his room, but Harry saw Regulus preparing a plate for him and sending it upstairs with a bit of magic.

Harry noticed Sirius scarfing down his food like he would never eat again and wondered if it helped him with the ritual. Remus was reading *The Daily Prophet* like he usually did, but his

hands were shaking slightly and he kept having to put the paper down flat on the table so that he could read it. Harry wondered if he should buy him a stand to hold it up for him.

Regulus was picking at his food, moving it around his plate like he wasn't actually hungry but he wanted to be supportive. He kept looking at the kitchen door like he expected James to come waltzing through it.

Harry wasn't hungry either if he was honest. His stomach was tied up in knots making him feel like any food that went down, would definitely come back up. He still tried though, mostly because he knew he'd be unconscious for at least two days following the ritual. After they were finished eating they moved into the library.

"Why are we doing it in here?"

"It's just where we've done the others," Remus told him. Some part of him wanted to protest, though he wasn't sure why. He rarely spent time in the library and he almost wanted to pick somewhere he felt more comfortable. Adrenaline made his hands shake, nervousness that he'd been pretending not to notice flowing through him all at once, and he just wanted to feel safe.

"Is that all right?" Regulus asked. He and Remus were the most observant of the group, but Remus was tending to Sirius, rubbing his shoulder and whispering something in his ear. Regulus, meanwhile, was looking at Harry like he could see straight through him. Like every thought, even the ones he didn't understand himself, were easily spotted and understood.

"It's fine," he lied. Regulus's eyebrows furrowed. The curls around his face were knotted and messy, which Harry hadn't noticed before, but it looked like he'd been tossing in his sleep and had failed to fix his hair when he got up that morning. It made the pit in Harry's stomach feel that much worse.

"Harry."

"It's really okay," Harry urged. He didn't want to make a fuss. He was certain that if they picked up on his fear too much, he wouldn't be able to push it aside any longer. Right now he could ignore it, pretend like it wasn't something unfathomable and unconquerable, but if anyone mentioned it, he would lose his battle with it.

Regulus stared him down, searching his face, but what he found there must have made him understand. He turned to Sirius with an air of superiority, he wore it like a cloak when he was nervous. It used to make Harry feel more comfortable, but he knew Regulus too well now. He was nervous too. How long could Regulus keep going before breaking under the strain he put on himself?

"Let's get started," Regulus said to Sirius who looked up at him with dazed eyes. Regulus clenched his teeth, the muscles in his neck jumping slightly, and Sirius blinked twice before nodding.

"We'll be right outside," Remus said, aiming the words at Harry. Harry tried to nod that he understood but it felt unnatural. His movements were too jerky. Regulus didn't look at him

again as he followed Remus out of the room. Harry was grateful for it. He felt like a little kid who wanted to run to his most trusted adult and beg him for safety. If Regulus had looked at him, Harry wouldn't have been able to stop himself.

I'm not a little kid, he thought to himself. If he said it enough, it might actually feel true.

Sirius grinned at him suddenly, the dazed look from before gone in a flash. He looked manic, it did nothing to calm Harry's nerves.

"Ready?" Sirius asked. Harry's throat was too tight to get words out, but Sirius didn't appear to need a real answer to him. "Let's sit down." He gestured toward the carpet. It was thick and expensive, soft against Harry's fingertips as he collapsed onto the ground. He crossed his legs carefully, trying to ignore the way they were going numb.

Sirius took a few deep breaths, he was looking toward Harry but Harry felt like he was being stared through, like Sirius could no longer see him. He wondered how Sirius could manage to do such a dangerous ritual so many times. He didn't even want to do it once yet Sirius faced it like it was almost easy. Harry wondered if he would ever be that brave.

"You don't have to do anything, the ritual will carry you through all of it. Once we're on the other side, we just have to make sure that the extra soul doesn't follow us back."

"How will we know if it didn't?" Harry asked then immediately wished he hadn't. He could tell that Sirius didn't have an answer to that question.

"Don't worry," he said. Harry was worried. "We'll know."

Harry swallowed. His throat felt dry. He wished he could go get some water, go do something before they started, but he didn't think he'd be able to stand.

"I'm ready," he lied. Sirius nodded and with a grace that Harry had never once embodied, began the delicate action of opening the ritual.

When asked about it later, Harry wouldn't be able to explain the process. He remembered sitting across from Sirius then the next he knew, he felt hollowed out and light, his body somewhere untouchable and the world around him nothing but a vibrant garden. His nervousness was gone, nothing was left but a comfortable emptiness.

"Wow." Sirius's voice drew Harry's attention. He was glad he wasn't alone, though if he had been, he wasn't sure he would have known the difference. Only Sirius's presence allowed for such knowledge. "It never looked like this for me."

"What did it look like?" Harry asked. Sirius shrugged, his eyes still searching the garden around them. It was beautiful, a safety that Harry had never experienced in life.

"A lot of different things. It was never this colorful."

Harry hummed thoughtfully. "How will we find Voldemort's soul?"

Sirius turned in a slow circle. "I suppose we'll have to walk for a bit." He didn't wait for Harry to respond, just started moving through the thick plants. They all seemed to curl away from him as he walked like they were welcoming him in and laying a path. Harry followed, he felt like he was floating behind him.

The garden seemed endless, colors he'd never even imagined creating a never-ending canvas. It was like living art made just for him. Though he didn't breathe in the same way he did in his body, it still felt like he was breathing in every petal he could see. As if they were settling down into his lungs and making him beautiful from the inside out. As if he was being cleansed.

"Do you see how they're changing?" Sirius asked suddenly. Harry hadn't noticed it at first, but now that it was pointed out to him, he could see what Sirius was talking about. Slowly, the flowers and leaves had begun to lose their colors, as if they were slowly siphoned of pigment.

"Strange," Harry said, reaching out to delicately touch the petals of one of the flowers. It was soft against his skin, but the color seemed to fade even further in his grasp.

"I bet we're getting close." Harry silently agreed. He could feel something dark looming off in the distance, somewhere unseen, somewhere hidden. It wasn't unsettling like it would have been in real life. He didn't think he was in danger though he wondered if maybe that was the actual danger. Maybe that's why people didn't survive the ritual sometimes because their instincts were watered down.

They pushed through another few bushes, the plants were beginning to grow thorns and they scratched against Harry's skin uncomfortably. After one particularly brittle and sharp bush, they finally entered a small clearing. Around them were blackened plants that looked like they'd been burnt to a crisp. In the center of the clearing was a small, graying corpse. It looked like it had once been human, but time had withered it away. Its chest was impaled by a thick root growing out of the ground.

"How—" Sirius breathed, taking an aborted step forward before stumbling back so that he was standing in front of Harry as if he were guarding him.

"What is that?" Harry said, peering around his shoulder to try and get a better look.

"It's his soul." The voice seemed to come from every direction and for a moment, Harry felt real danger sweep past them, but just as soon as it arrived, it was gone, replaced by a feeling of safety so profound that he wondered if he'd ever experienced such a thing.

"Oh," Sirius said quietly, looking to his right at something Harry couldn't see yet. "You've killed him."

"I did." It was a woman's voice. Sirius moved out of the way just as Harry was planning to step around him, revealing a person entering the clearing, flowers closing the path behind her. Harry didn't recognize her at first, his thoughts felt slow and syrupy. But when she smiled and her green eyes glittered, Harry knew right down to his bones who she was.

“Mum,” he choked out the word. Lily opened her arms before he even realized he was moving. His feet barely touched the ground as he hurried forward, the body in the center of the clearing forgotten. She caught him like she was used to doing it, as if it was the easiest thing in the world. Every painful lonely moment swelled up inside him, all curling together into something unmanageable. A moment ago, he’d been wondering if he could feel anything at all while he was in this place, but in his mother’s arms, he knew that he was safe to feel more than he’d ever felt.

“Oh, Harry,” Lily whispered. He was openly sobbing, but the noises were cut off and quiet, only his shaking chest gave him away. She ran her fingers through his hair, waiting patiently as he lost himself. When he could finally breathe again, he whispered, “How are you here?”

“They didn’t tell you?” she replied disapprovingly. Harry’s arms tightened slightly.

“We couldn’t be sure that you would be here,” Sirius said, his voice floating from somewhere very far away. “I didn’t want to give him false hope.”

“I understand,” Lily said softly. “This is my last time.”

“Ours too.”

“Last time?” Harry asked, pulling away so that he could look at her, could memorize her face before he lost it again. Already, grief was circling his throat like a snake threatening to kill him.

“I’ve been visiting Sirius for a while now. He needed my help to get through some things,” she whispered conspiratorially. Harry laughed softly as if he understood. “But I knew you’d come eventually.”

“You were waiting for me?”

“Of course,” she said. “I knew I had to see you. Don’t tell Sirius, but you were always my favorite person.”

Tears were already streaking his face, but he felt more from the moment she spoke. “Did you see Dad?” he asked.

Lily smiled sadly. “No,” she replied to Harry’s disappointment. “We’ve said all we needed to say to each other. The living can’t stay here for very long and there was someone else that needed to speak to him.”

“Who?”

“He should be the one to tell you that, I think,” Lily said kindly.

Harry nearly lost it again, he felt like he was barely holding on. It was his mother, his mum, a woman he never thought he’d get to meet. She’d become this untouchable figure in his mind over the years, and now she was here, perfect and beautiful, just as people had described her.

“I wish I could stay,” he confessed. He felt guilty for it the moment he said it, but Lily didn’t look disappointed in him. She placed her forehead against his.

“I know,” she said. “But you have people that are waiting for you.”

“I know,” he replied. “I know. I just — I wish—”

“I’ve always wanted more time with you, Harry.” He had to bite his lip to keep himself from sobbing again. “I promise we’ll see each other again, but for now, you’re not alone.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, even though his heart felt like going back without her was as close to alone as he’d ever been. She looked at him expectantly though and he couldn’t let her down. “I have Sirius and Remus.” He thought of them at their wedding, of how much they meant to him. “And Dad.” They’d just started to form a relationship, it felt like it had taken years. “And—and—”

“Regulus,” she completed the thought for him.

“You know about him?” he asked. He always wondered how she felt about him. Had she known him and his dad? What did she think of him? Especially now given how important he was to Harry. He didn’t feel guilt for it, not exactly, but trepidation was still dancing across his skin.

Lily, to his surprise, threw her head back and laughed. It was a twinkling sound like a cartoon fairy. It caused a watery smile to cross his face even though he didn’t understand what she found so funny. She pulled him against her again, placing her chin on his shoulder. He wondered what it would have been like to spend his childhood being cradled by a woman who loved him.

“I know about him,” she said quietly, then lowered her voice to a playful whisper. “Who do you think brought him back?”

Harry gasped. “How?”

“We don’t have time to unpack it,” she said. “I’m not even sure that I could if I wanted to.” She sighed against him. “You both need to go. You’re almost out of time.”

“No,” he said softly.

“I’m sorry,” she said regretfully. “But if you stay any longer, you’ll have trouble getting back.”

“Please, just another minute,” he begged. He’d barely had any time at all. He wished he’d known he was going to see her so he’d had time to prepare what he wanted to say to her. Now, he felt like he was at a loss for words. He didn’t want to lose her again.

“Sirius,” she called.

“I’m here,” he replied, his hand settling on the middle of Harry’s back. “Come on.”

Harry was struggling to breathe. He pulled Lily in one final time, hugging her as tightly as he could before he let Sirius drag him away. He wouldn't see her again, not for the rest of his life, and though he'd already lost her once, losing her again felt so much worse. Sirius led them back, the ritual carrying Harry's soul back into his body. The tears didn't stop the entire time. Not even as the heavy weight of his body settled around him.

He couldn't move, all of his muscles felt like they were being dragged through the floor. He could only stare at the ceiling, having fallen onto his back at some point during the ritual, and black was already tugging at the edges of his vision when Regulus came into view.

He looked so relieved to see him, tension finally dropping away from his eyes as he cupped Harry's face.

"You're back," he said, his voice distant as Harry finally lost the battle with his exhaustion and succumbed to the darkness.

It took him a long time to wake up, he could sense time passing as he lost hours to sleep, and when he finally did blink his eyes open, he still felt like he could barely move. He was in his bedroom, but he wasn't alone. Regulus was sitting in his desk chair, leisurely flipping through a Quidditch magazine. He looked tired again. Harry had hoped he would have been resting.

"Regulus," he croaked, his throat dry from lack of use.

Regulus's eyes snapped up to look at him. "Finally," he mumbled, so quietly that Harry was sure he wasn't meant to hear it. "How do you feel?"

Harry tried to lift his head but it was too difficult. "Hungry," he said honestly.

Regulus smirked, closing the magazine and tossing it onto Harry's desk. "Naturally."

"Is Sirius okay?" Harry asked, unaware that he was going to ask it before the words left his mouth. Regulus's smirk softened into a smile.

"He's fine," he said. "Worried about you."

"Why?"

"It took a lot out of you, the ritual."

"Did it work?" Harry asked.

Regulus pursed his lips for a second. "I believe so. Do you still feel anything?"

Harry tried to search his mind, tried to look for those uncertain feelings that had been permeating inside him for months, maybe years, but he was too exhausted to successfully find anything and ended up slipping back into a deep sleep before he could respond to Regulus.

A week passed before he felt well enough to get out of bed, but by that point, he was sure the ritual had worked. There were no more whisperings, no more paranoid thoughts. He was free. The grief from seeing his mother was still somewhere deep in his chest, but he wasn't ready to look at it yet. Instead, he felt elated. At least, he did until he left his room to find Regulus and Remus hurrying around the house packing things into several expensive-looking trunks.

“What's going on?” Harry asked.

“Oh, Harry, you're up,” Remus said.

“We're packing. The new house is ready and we need to start getting you settled there.”

Nervousness spiked in him. “But what about—”

“You'll still be able to receive letters from your friends here at Grimmauld for the rest of the summer, and you'll see them at Bill and Fleur's wedding,” Regulus explained like he'd already been prepared for the question.

Harry relaxed slightly, but not completely. “I don't understand why we have to move,” he said petulantly. He expected Regulus to roll his eyes or perhaps for him to explain again that Harry needed to be kept safe, but instead he turned his back like he was avoiding eye contact like he was hiding something. Harry's eyebrows furrowed.

“Do you want to bring the chess set? I don't think we have one there,” he said to Remus, pretending like Harry hadn't spoken.

Harry wanted to demand to know what they were hiding because now it seemed very, very obvious that they'd been keeping something from him. He wondered if it was because of Voldemort's soul that they kept whatever it was from him. He huffed in frustration and turned to go back into his room.

Within two days, all of his belongings were packed and sent through the floo to their new house. Apparently, the floo would only work for a few more months and then it would be restricted to only Remus. No one else would be able to leave or come through. Harry didn't understand why, but he didn't feel like questioning them on it yet.

Once everything was gone, Harry waited for Hedwig to finish her last trip delivering a letter from Ron, and then he locked her in her cage to carry her through the floo. He watched James go first. They still hadn't talked about what James had seen during the ritual. They hadn't talked much at all. Harry wasn't sure if he should tell him that Lily was the reason Regulus was with them. He hadn't mentioned it to anyone.

He climbed into the fireplace once James's green flames had vanished, stating “Black Manor” before swirling away from Grimmauld. Regulus, Remus, and Sirius were still somewhere in Grimmauld, finishing their final checks of the house. It was only he and James going this time.

He landed in a small shack, barely four walls nailed together. There wasn't so much as a rug in the room, just a dark space, the only lights spilling in through the cracks in the roof.

“Huh?” Harry said. Hedwig was flapping angrily in her cage, she always hated traveling through the floo.

“It’s just a landing place. There is no floo inside the wards,” James said, opening the door and letting the sun splash into the room.

“Oh,” Harry said. “So where do we go from here?”

“We have a bit of a walk,” James replied. Harry followed him through the doorway with a frown. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but this lackluster entrance wasn’t it. When he stepped out into the sun, he gasped. They were on a cliffside, ocean waves spraying across rocks below them, the salt water smell burning his nostrils for a moment before he adjusted.

“Wow,” Harry breathed. It was beautiful, he could already imagine flying his broom over the coast, dropping down to the water’s surface, and letting the ocean air rush through his hair. He looked in the other direction, expecting to the manor they were moving to, but he found nothing but an empty stretch of land.

“It’s the wards,” James said as if he could feel Harry’s confusion. “You’ll be able to see it soon.” They walked side by side to the top of a wide hill and then James handed him a small slip of paper that read the location of Black Manor. It caught fire the moment Harry had read it and when he looked up, a huge white building stretched out in front of him.

“Whoa,” he breathed.

“It’s impressive,” James said with a small laugh. Harry had to agree. He’d never seen a house so large. He didn’t even know what a manor was before that moment.

“It’s only going to be the five of us living here?” Harry asked. James made a choking sound. “I mean until Regulus leaves.”

James laughed, loud and boisterous. “Yep,” he said “Yeah.” He seemed to be trying to say something else, but he couldn’t get the words out.

“What?” Harry asked uncertainly.

James shook his head. “I can’t believe Regulus made me be the one to do this,” James mumbled before hurrying forward toward the front door. Harry rushed after him.

“What does that mean?” Harry demanded.

“You’ll see,” James said with a snicker. “Come on.”

They made it to the front door relatively quickly, but the grounds were decisively large. Harry was still disappointed that he wouldn’t be returning to Hogwarts, but he guessed this wouldn’t be a bad place to spend his seventh year. That is, until he walked into the foyer, and heard a disgruntled voice float down the main staircase in front of him.

“Finally, you said you would be here two hours ago—”

Draco's voice cut off right as he caught sight of Harry, and Harry, who was much more well-adjusted than anyone gave him credit for, only stared back for two full seconds before turning on his heel and walking right back out the front door.

the wheel of fortune.

Chapter Notes

it gets a little hot and heavy near the end, just be aware

Regulus's scars didn't bother him most days. They didn't hurt or itch, they were raised where they marked his skin, but unless he sought them out, he couldn't really feel them. Most of the time he forgot that they were there. It was only at times like these when he was dressing in front of the mirror, slowly adorning the items for his formal robes, that he paid them any mind.

He was shirtless, his shirt clutched in his left hand while he ran the fingers of his right hand along one of the longest scars. It ran straight across his chest, just above his right nipple. For the first time in a while, he felt shame. It was usually the dark mark burned into his skin that made him feel ashamed of himself, but these scars could evoke the same feeling. Just more proof that he'd once been so terrible, that he'd chosen the wrong side and had paid the ultimate price for it.

Sirius had once said that he thought what Regulus had done was brave. He'd been drunk when he said it, so Regulus wasn't sure if he meant it, but it didn't truly matter to him either way. He wasn't brave. He wasn't good. Not like the rest of them.

It had been weighing on him for a long time, but as the summer months had turned his energetic, nervous thoughts into something sluggish and draining, the idea of how wrong he was had crawled under his ribs and made a home in his lungs. He hadn't had a full breath since May.

He pulled on his shirt, buttoning it slowly while he stared down his scars. He hated the idea of anyone seeing them. He hoped that if Tom Riddle killed him, *when* he killed him, that he destroyed his body so that his family—Harry, *James*—wouldn't have to see what monster lay underneath his clothes.

"Are you in here moping?" Sirius said, his voice causing Regulus to jump slightly. He'd considered adding a ward to his bedroom so no one could enter, but it seemed like overkill if he wasn't going to be there for very long. He regretted not doing it now. At least his shirt was on enough to hide the scars.

"I'm not moping," Regulus said. Sirius rolled his eyes in the mirror, he was leaning against the doorframe, hardly dressed nice enough for such a formal event.

"Sure, you're not," Sirius said. "So, you aren't even a little sad that we're leaving tomorrow?"

“Nope,” Regulus said dismissively.

“You're not going to miss a single person here?” Sirius raised his eyebrow questioningly.

“I'll miss Harry, but Remus will take good care of him.” Regulus knew what Sirius was edging toward. He was about the last person in the country that Regulus was about to open up to.

“You're so full of shit,” Sirius said. Regulus sighed defeatedly.

“You don't have to come, you know that right?” Regulus said.

Shortly after the ritual with Harry, Sirius had decided that Regulus couldn't go off on his own, that it was too dangerous. He had already discussed it at length with Remus by the time he confronted Regulus. Regulus had felt thoroughly ambushed and had agreed to let Sirius come along with very little fanfare, mostly because he was too shocked to argue and by the time he'd thought to do so, it was far too late.

“I know,” Sirius said with a sideways smile. Regulus couldn't tell how Sirius felt about the whole thing, if he didn't want to come or if he was scared of what they might face together, he was hiding it well. He kept asking like it was a regular errand and not a task that would likely end in them never coming home.

He might never see Remus again. The man he'd just married after waiting for so, so long. And yet, he seemed at ease with it all.

Maybe he wasn't as sure of his death as Regulus was about his own. He'd already started preparing for the inevitability of it. When he left Black Manor, he would never see Harry again. Or Remus. Or Draco. Or James. Or anyone else who mattered to him who wasn't Sirius. They would continue with their lives, and Regulus would be the sacrificial lamb that allowed them to live safely.

Only if he could kill Tom Riddle though. Or at least weaken him to the point where he could no longer hurt anyone. Regulus only had to survive until that was done.

He hated the way exhaustion hung onto the edges of his skin. He'd barely begun and yet it felt like he hadn't rested since he sunk to the bottom of the water deep in the cave. He'd been tired before that too: lonely, angry, lost. How little things had changed even as he'd accidentally built a new life for himself.

All those feelings, that despondency that felt never-ending, made his inevitable death seem less taxing. At least he would be done.

He wondered what all of these thoughts and feelings were doing to his face, something complicated he was sure, because Sirius's smile dropped slightly like he could see right through him and he didn't like what he was finding. Regulus tried to wipe his face of any emotion. He wasn't sure he could imitate happiness just then without it looking inhuman and that wouldn't help the worried look around Sirius's eyes.

“How long till we have to leave for the wedding?” Regulus asked. Sirius looked at the extravagant pocket watch he’d stolen from one of their ancestor’s rooms.

“Half an hour,” Sirius said. “Harry’s already ready. He wants to head over early to see Ron and Hermione.”

“Understandable,” Regulus muttered. Harry had been angry with them for hiding Draco in Black Manor for all of two hours before the sullen teenager act took the anger’s place. He’d spent the rest of the summer staring out windows like he was trapped in prison. Regulus didn’t think he and Draco had spoken more than two words to each other beyond ‘Just stay out of my way, Malfoy’ and ‘Not going to be a problem, Potter.’

Regulus wasn’t exactly surprised by their harsh reactions to each other, but it definitely added a chill to the house that he didn’t enjoy. He hoped that Hermione’s presence after the wedding today would lighten things up for them. There had been rumors spreading all summer that new anti-muggleborn legislation was about to be enacted and Hermione, as one of Harry’s closest friends and almost certainly one of the targets of the new Death Eaters, no longer felt safe returning to Hogwarts.

It hadn’t been an easy decision. Obviously, she wanted to finish her education, but if it was going to put her in that much danger then it wasn’t worth it. When Regulus floated the idea of her coming to stay with them to be taught by Remus, she’d jumped at the chance, only second-guessing herself when she thought of her parents.

They were muggles, completely defenseless to the wizards. Even if they’d warded her parents’ house, that didn’t mean they were guaranteed safety. Regulus had been trying to find a solution when she’d quietly suggested that they be sent away.

“You think they’ll leave you with us?” Regulus asked. Hermione didn’t meet his eyes.

“No,” she said like a confession, “but if they didn’t remember they had a daughter...”

Regulus could tell that Hermione expected him to be horrified by what she’d said, but he found he understood her desire to keep them safe, even by sacrificing her place in their lives.

“I’ve been researching memory spells,” Hermione said.

“Remus is good at them,” Regulus said quickly. Hermione’s eyes were watery when she finally looked up at him. “He’ll help you. I promise.”

“Thank you, Regulus,” she whispered.

That had been a handful of weeks ago now and Hermione had been staying at the Burrow since her parents had left the country. He knew that Harry was itching to join them. It would be lonely here with only three teenagers and two adults. However, he could make the argument that James was just another teenager given his attitude toward dangerous flying maneuvers and sneaking outside the wards to watch the Manor disappear and reappear over and over again. He would keep things lively.

Remus would have to keep a close eye on all of them.

The one relief was the fact that James had seemingly taken Draco under his wing a bit. Regulus would have never seen it coming, but he'd caught them playing chess and Exploding Snap together more than once, and though Draco never seemed to talk much, it was obvious that he found James's presence comforting enough.

Regulus was glad he would have someone. He'd already had a long talk with Remus about how Draco had a bad upbringing and that he might say some offensive things, especially about Remus's status as a werewolf (Regulus had no idea if Draco would actually be bold enough to say those things to his face or not) but that he still needed to be protected.

"It's okay," Remus had said gently. "I'm not going to throw him out or hurt him or anything. He's safe here, I promise."

It had taken longer than Regulus would have expected for him to feel comfortable enough to drop the subject. He was worried about them all hiding together, especially if they ended up having to leave the country. It could end in disaster if they didn't find a way to co-exist.

"Ready?" Sirius said. Regulus wondered how much he was drifting in the conversation. He didn't feel like he had a good grasp on the here and now.

"I'm ready," Regulus said, grabbing the rest of his formal robes. The set was expensive, probably more expensive than what Fleur and Bill would be wearing, but he'd never worn them and he figured now was his last chance to do so. They were a dark green color with silver accents running along the sleeves and neckline. He'd loved them the first time he'd seen them, but that was right before graduating from Hogwarts and there hadn't been many formal events after that.

He followed Sirius out of the bedroom after allowing himself one more long look in the mirror. He looked good, even he could admit that, and as long as he didn't think about the scars, dark mark, and general rot of his character below the fabric, he could imagine that he deserved to look as good as he did.

Remus and Harry were waiting near the front door when they finally made it down to the foyer. Both of them were dressed in nice wizard robes, though nothing too lavish. Remus grinned when he saw them, opening his arms to allow Sirius to step into them. Sirius stepped up onto his toes and kissed Remus softly on the corner of his mouth. They did that sort of thing all the time now, uncaring of any audience they had. Regulus didn't resent them for it exactly, but he also always insisted on looking away from them.

He couldn't stare too long.

Harry smiled though, touched by the gentle way Sirius and Remus handled each other.

James wasn't anywhere in sight to Regulus's disappointment. He hadn't realized that he was looking forward to James's reaction to his outfit until he realized he wasn't going to get it. He gave a cursory glance around looking for him and was going to ask where he was, but when he looked up and found Sirius watching him with a knowing smirk, he abandoned the idea.

James wasn't invited to the wedding—mostly because Bill and Fleur had no idea who he was. It made sense that he wouldn't be down there waiting to see them off.

Traveling to the Burrow was tedious. They'd decided not to use portkeys near Black Manor, magic like that could leave traces, so it was only in emergencies that they would allow that kind of magic in the area. So in order to go the Burrow they had to take the floo to Grimmauld Place — it would be restricted to just Remus the moment Regulus and Sirius were gone the next day — and then floo again to a pub within apparating distance of the Burrow. By the time they were walking up the dirt road to the Weasleys' home, they were sweating.

It was an unnaturally hot day. Especially given the way the weather had taken a turn for the worse all summer following the dementors slowly abandoning Azkaban in favor of helping Tom. It had been chilly and dark through most of June and July, but today it was sunny, the heat beating down on their exposed necks as they traveled through the Burrow's wards.

Harry took off when he spotted Ron walking around outside the house carrying a stack of plates. He didn't bother to say goodbye to them as he went, but Regulus didn't begrudge him his friendships. If anything, it brought him solace knowing that Harry could still experience such joy at just seeing his best friend after a short stint apart.

"He's upset that they won't spend seventh year together," Sirius said quietly as they watched Harry go. Regulus blew out a long sigh.

"It's unfair that their time had to be cut short. He deserved to have a good childhood," Regulus said. The grief of time lost seemed to settle around them like fresh snow, cold and statuesque. Regulus noticed Remus putting a comforting arm around Sirius's shoulders. Suddenly the hot sun didn't feel so warm, it felt isolating and frigid.

It took them another minute or so to reach the house. Regulus was already plastering on a fake smile, planning to grin his way through the entire evening, when Arthur came rushing down the road behind them.

"The Minister is right behind me," he panted.

"The Minister?" Remus asked.

"He wants to talk to you, Regulus, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione."

"Me?" Regulus said quietly, deeply confused.

"Sirius, Scrimgeour, he can't see me," Remus whispered frantically.

"Upstairs," Sirius said urgently. "Regulus, come get us when he's gone." Regulus nodded in a daze. They disappeared into the house right as the crack of apparition sounded in the distance.

Regulus had never met Scrimgeour, but he'd heard of him, and he was just as stern and intimidating as Regulus had expected of a man who used to be Head Auror. He wasn't exactly

afraid to speak to him—although he had murdered someone in his past, that might become a problem at some point—but he was uneasy knowing that he wanted to talk to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

What could he want with them?

“I’ll go find the others,” Arthur mumbled, heading around the side of the house. Regulus headed into the living room of the Burrow. The hackles raised on the back of his neck as he closed the door, taking a slow seat on one of the dilapidated couches as he waited. It didn’t take long. Scrimgeour barged in like he owned the place, demanding to speak to Regulus alone, followed by Harry, Ron, then Hermione—all alone.

Regulus refused without a second word. Scrimgeour was here to push them around and Regulus wasn’t going to let it happen.

“I am here, as I’m sure you know, because of Albus Dumbledore’s will,” Scrimgeour said. It caused a stir; Ron, Harry, and Hermione all jumped in to argue with the man. Regulus remained quiet until it was time to read the will.

Dumbledore had left him something, but why? What could he need now that he didn’t have before?

“To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave my Deluminator, in the hope that he will remember me when he uses it.”

Regulus had never heard of a Deluminator, but it must mean something. Another little trail to follow for the people that Regulus had refused to let Dumbledore involve while he was still alive.

“To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, in the hope that she will find it entertaining and instructive.”

A children’s book? Where was Dumbledore leading them? He wanted to snatch items right out of their hands, crack them open, and find their secrets.

“To Harry James Potter, I leave the Snitch he caught in his first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill.”

Harry grabbed the snitch while the room sat with bated breath, but nothing happened as it settled into his palm.

He thought they were done as they all relaxed back into their seats. Regulus had all but forgotten that Scrimgeour had insisted on speaking to him as well. When he heard about the Sword of Gryffindor that Dumbledore had supposedly left to him, Regulus knew that Dumbledore was up to something.

What could the sword do for him now? It hardly mattered considering Dumbledore wasn’t actually *allowed* to gift the sword to anyone so Regulus was left with nothing but empty

hands. Hermione and Harry seemed incensed that Scrimgeour refused to give it to him. Regulus was just confused. He'd thought that the mysteries were over.

He was still thinking about it while the wedding began, while he watched Harry have fun with his friends, while he was watching Ron get jealous over Hermione's reunion with Krum. He was distracted, too far in his head.

So far he almost didn't notice the patronus landing in the center of the tent full of dancing, celebrating people.

"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."

It was madness within a second. People began apparating out. Regulus jolted into action, searching for Harry and Hermione. She was coming home with them, he had to get them out. He didn't see Sirius or Remus either, but he had to hope that they could watch out for each other.

Someone apparated next to him, and he thought for a moment that it was someone apparating away, until he felt a harsh, stinging pain slice his arm. He dropped his wand and ducked when the person tried to hit him with another cutting curse, this one right across the face. He stumbled, picked up his wand, and took off.

He ran, shoving people aside, and when he found Hermione in the arms of Ron, she grabbed her hand. Ron let her go with a harrowing look on his face, she stared back as long as they could see him through the crowd and they searched for Harry.

They found him on the far end of the tent, helping a woman stand.

"Harry!" Regulus shouted. Harry spun to look at him and within a second, Regulus had them both. He reached into his pocket and touched the pen James and Remus had turned into a portkey.

The feel of the portkey pulling on his navel made him feel momentarily claustrophobic before the moment was over and his feet collided with the rocky ground near the manor. He only remained standing for a second before collapsing under the weight of Harry and Hermione who were less adept at portkey travel. All three of them hit the ground in a heap and Regulus landed awkwardly on the arm that was already burning from the cutting curse someone had hit him with a moment earlier.

He really liked these robes, he thought darkly.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Hermione mumbled. It was all elbows and knees as Harry slowly stood, pulling Hermione after him.

"It's okay," Regulus said, pushing himself up once they were both off of him.

"You're injured," Harry breathed, his wide eyes glued to the blood seeping out of the cut in his robe.

"I'm okay," Regulus said by quickly. "Let's get inside the wards then I'll fix it."

Hermione and Harry didn't need to be told twice and the three of them made their way quickly up the hill, passing the shack they'd created for the floo, and heading into the wards. The Manor lit their way the moment it came into view. The candle lights inside made it look warm and welcoming.

The sound of someone moving behind them drew his attention.

"Hurry," he yelled at Harry and Hermione, and both of them started running. He had his wand pointed in the opposite direction in a flash, but it was only Sirius and Remus, hurrying after them. Remus was limping, one of his legs stiff like he'd been hit with an ill-formed freezing jinx. Sirius was supporting a lot of his movements, strain obvious on his face, and Regulus cast a charm to lighten Remus's weight. The tension on Sirius's face eased just enough for him to pass where Regulus was standing.

"Get inside," Sirius said stiffly. Regulus hurried after them, bringing up the rear.

James was waiting for them inside.

"We were attacked," Harry was saying as Regulus rushed through the doorway, his voice breathless. He sounded so young. He was *so young*.

"Regulus?" James said right before they made eye contact.

He was about to take a step forward, Regulus could already see him shifting, when Regulus said, "Help Remus." James's movements stuttered and for a second he looked stung, but then he noticed Remus, limping and sweating with exertion, and he rushed into action. Sirius, Remus, and James were out of the room in an instant, heading toward the room Sirius and Remus shared.

Regulus turned to Hermione and Harry. They still looked shell-shocked and stressed.

"Are you both okay?" he said carefully. He waited for them both to nod. "Good," he said with a sigh.

"Ron, his family—" Harry started to say.

"They'll be okay. They have each other."

"Are you sure?" Hermione whispered.

"Yes," Regulus said assuredly. The Death Eaters would be foolish to go after such a prominent pureblood family this early into everything. The person who had attacked him must have been a fluke, something personal. The ministry had only fallen a few hours ago, they were only there to make people feel scared. And perhaps to get Harry. The Weasleys would be fine. "Harry, do you remember where Hermione's room is?"

Harry nodded. They'd given her a room only a hallway over from where Harry and Draco were staying. Close enough that they could see each other quickly, but not so close that Regulus felt he needed to be worried about any of them. Even Draco and Harry were separated by a few empty rooms.

“Will you show her to them? I can bring up some tea in a little bit.”

“Your arm—” Harry pointed toward him.

“I’ll get James to fix it.” Harry seemed unsure of his response, Regulus wondered if Harry thought he was lying. He wasn’t sure himself if he was lying. His body hadn’t settled yet from the attack, he could still feel the adrenaline surging through him. Harry eventually nodded and he and Hermione headed up the main staircase slowly together, neither of them speaking.

Regulus nearly collapsed the moment they were out of sight, his body urging him to curl up into a ball for safety. He should probably check on Draco and make sure he knew what happened. He could recheck the wards first though, he could do something to make him feel like he wasn’t still in danger.

It all felt wrong, as if nothing would solve the erratic feeling in his chest.

He moved down the hallway to his left in a daze, his vision blurring with the feelings he couldn’t bear to process. He hadn’t spent much time exploring the manor. It was such a massive building, sprawling in the way it was built, but it felt so empty as if it was meant to be filled to the brim with guests and family. Regulus couldn’t pull himself away from the inhabited rooms long enough to learn the layout. He wanted to be close to everyone, he knew the isolation the future held.

He ended up in a room that looked like a library. There were several in the manor, but this one was noticeably smaller than the others. It had likely been used as an office by one of the past owners. Old, leather-bound books lined the walls. He wondered what topics decorated the office walls. What did this person feel was important enough to surround them while they worked?

It was unnaturally cold in the room. He wondered when the room had last been entered before James went through with his cleaning charms. He shivered slightly and all at once the room was filled with light as the fire ignited.

Was it tied to the wards? Did the fires light when someone inside was cold? Had he done it by accident?

It was only when he turned toward the door to see James stowing his wand up his sleeve that he realized who’d warmed the room for him. He looked haggard like he was the one that had just come from battle. His hair was sticking up all over the place making him look disheveled. That paired with the stubble on his jaw gave him a rugged handsomeness that took Regulus’s breath away.

“You’re dripping blood all over the floors,” James said. The words sounded like ‘*Take off your clothes*’ to Regulus’s ears, the loaded tone confusing him even as James delivered such a matter-of-fact statement.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus responded. He felt breathless, it must have been the panic. James took three striding steps forward and Regulus had to work not to step backward. He wasn’t afraid

of him, but suddenly the idea of James pinning him up against the wall was the only thing he could think of.

“Can I heal you?” James breathed when he was just a foot away. His eyes were shining with something unspoken, something lofty and intoxicating.

“Yes,” Regulus said without thinking. James reached out with a careful hand, wrapping his fingers around Regulus’s wrist delicately as he began pushing up his sleeve. Regulus looked down at the slash in his robe. “I really liked these robes,” he muttered. He wondered if he was shallow, caring about clothes so much.

James laughed humorlessly. “These robes,” he muttered, “should be illegal.”

Regulus’s lips twisted up into a wry smile. “Why?”

James’s eyes turned on him, heated and possessive. Regulus felt it right down to his core. “Don’t ask me,” he begged. Regulus wanted to demand an explanation anyway, he wanted to know every detail that was running through James’s brain. His heart was still pounding, he’d nearly died, he’d nearly lost someone, but now he was standing across from James and that hungry look on his face, and the adrenaline had nowhere to go.

Regulus hissed as the healing spell from James's wand made his arm sting as the skin was knit back together.

“I’m sorry,” James whispered. Regulus sucked in a heavy breath. They were so close now that their noses were nearly touching. James was so warm, Regulus could feel the body heat burning off of him. Even his gaze was enough to warm Regulus down to his bones.

But it wasn’t enough. It wasn't nearly enough.

Blood rushed in his ears as shook off James’s hand on his wrist just enough to lace their fingers together. The small logical voice inside him was yelling that this was a bad idea, that this was reckless, that he wasn't thinking straight. He’d been so careful, keeping enough distance so he couldn’t be hurt by James again.

But I’m leaving tomorrow, another voice whispered. *I’m never going to see him again. I’ll die before I get a chance. I’m leaving tomorrow.*

“Regulus?” James whispered, a question in his voice and the way his eyebrows climbed up his forehead.

The logical voice grew quieter and quieter as Regulus memorized the shape of James's face. He’d done it before, in a past life, but James had changed since then, he’d aged. He was a man now. And Regulus wanted him more than he'd ever wanted anyone.

When Regulus's eyes landed on James’s lips, James breathed, “Regulus.”

Regulus was done for, his self-control gone with the rest of his common sense and survival skills. He’d used them all tonight.

He lunged forward, closing that last sliver of space between them, as his lips connected with James's, warm and soft against his mouth. He was heat itself, he was like a fire burning in the center of the universe, lighting up every corner inside Regulus's haunted mind. James was all-consuming, he was everything.

James groaned into his mouth and Regulus took the advantage of his parted lips by slithering his tongue against James's. Just the taste of him sent a rush of endorphins down his spine, the feeling pulling at the balls of his feet before shooting back up and making him light-headed. He explored James's mouth with a greedy eagerness.

James let him, opening for him like he'd just been waiting to be asked for it, and though Regulus loved it, *savored* it, he wanted more. He *needed* more.

He bit harshly on James's bottom lip, just enough to pull a surprised gasp from the man. It worked just as he'd planned and suddenly James's hands were everywhere, gripping him and pulling him against his strong chest. His fingers were bruising on Regulus's skin, but he relished the feeling.

He dragged him from the room without thinking, their mouths never disconnecting for more than a few seconds at a time, just enough to see where they were going as Regulus pulled them to his bedroom. The fire was already burning, but with a wave of his hand, the lights went out. He had enough wherewithal to remember the scars littering his skin. He wanted James, but he didn't want him to see. Not everything.

James didn't question him and he didn't complain. He pulled Regulus's formal robes off with practiced ease that could only come from years of wearing wizard robes himself. Regulus pulled at James's clothes in turn, and before he could take a full breath, they were naked, skin to skin, under the quilt on his bed.

James's fingers never stopped their ironclad grip and Regulus was already fantasizing about the bruises he would find in the morning. Perhaps he would cast a stasis charm on them so that he could wear the symbol of James's desire on his skin. He never wanted them to fade. He'd already lost so much.

"Regulus," James moaned, his cock rubbing against Regulus's, both of them so hard that they ached. "What do you—"

"Shh," Regulus hushed him gently, intertwining the fingers of their hands again so that he could direct James to exactly where he wanted to be touched.

It had been a long time, far too long. The last time he'd done this had been with Barty, but even that was somewhere unreachable. This body had never been touched like this. It felt like offering up a sacred part of himself all over again.

And when James pushed inside of him after a long, torturous preparation, Regulus felt consecrated. Blessed by his cock, made whole by giving himself over to the man who'd dictated every feeling he'd had for years. The only one he'd ever loved and ever would love.

I'll never see him again, he thought as James worked him to orgasm. *It's just tonight.*

He didn't whisper that he loved him, he highly suspected that James would be more hurt by those words than soothed, but he thought it. He thought it again and again.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

the wheel of fortune part II.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James hadn't spent a night without dreaming all summer. He'd thought he might spend the rest of his life haunted by stressful nightmares of Regulus and Sirius dying, so when he woke that morning feeling rested and calm, his heart soared.

It was chilly in Regulus's bedroom. It was on the side of the manor that only got direct sunlight late in the afternoon, unlike James's bedroom, which heated the moment the sun rose. He felt warm despite the chill though, his arms still wrapped around Regulus's slender frame. Regulus's bare skin burned against his, marking him. He was sprawled out on top of James's chest breathing so deeply that a soft snore was spilling from lips.

James felt tender like any movement would bruise him, he felt like he'd been hit with a bludger the day before and was still recovering. It was strange because although he wouldn't want to be anywhere else other than under Regulus, he still worried about what this might mean, especially with Regulus about to leave.

Today. He's leaving today. He nearly groaned in irritation. He'd been urging himself not to think about Regulus's impending departure and it had almost been working, but dread pooled in his stomach each time he remembered. It was so much worse now. He'd just gotten him back. He was in his *bed*. And now Regulus was just supposed to leave? It didn't feel fair.

He watched the window with a pout on his lips. Regulus would have mocked him for it had he seen it. It made him feel better, acting like a petulant child, like if he threw enough of a tantrum he just might get his way. The curtains hanging on the window were made of an old, white fabric. When James had discovered them, he'd nearly vanished them altogether, he didn't think they'd survive a cleaning spell, but one of the days he'd spent alone at Grimmauld had dragged on for so long that he'd finally felt bored enough to try and fix them.

It had been difficult to learn the spells necessary to fix the fabric, but with the help of a few homemaking books, he'd managed it. He almost found himself enjoying the process by the time he finished. Watching each stitch come back together, one small centimeter at a time, made him feel like he could fix anything.

Being around Regulus was a lot like that. He had to be careful, he had to watch the movements, no matter how slow they were.

So, what had happened last night took him by surprise.

He'd thought they were getting to the point of maybe a tight hug when Regulus left (if James was lucky). He hadn't expected Regulus to look at him with so much heat in his eyes. He hadn't expected to feel a blaze light inside him at the mere touch of Regulus's lips on his.

He grazed a hand along Regulus's back gently, feeling the scars that marked his skin. James wasn't sure where they were from, but when Regulus had doused the fire in his bedroom's fireplace, James had taken the hint. He wasn't as unobservant as people liked to think. Most of Regulus's body was covered by a quilt, but James could see his naked shoulder poking out from below the blanket, the edge of one of the scars dug vengefully into his skin. It made James hurt to look at them.

In a perfect world, he would have stayed in bed for the rest of the day, perhaps made love again before Regulus had to leave, but alas within half an hour of waking, his stomach started rumbling so loudly that Regulus began to stir from his sleep.

James didn't want to disturb him. Regulus got so little sleep these days. Or any days. The circles under his eyes looked nearly permanent.

He slid out from under him as carefully as he could, sure that he would wake him with the movement, but breathed a sigh of relief when Regulus only snuggled deeper into the blankets and pillows. James bit his lower lip hard, digging his teeth in roughly to keep from making any sound.

Fuck, he wanted to get back in bed, but if he didn't eat soon, he'd started getting stomach cramps.

He snuck out of the room on his toes, grabbing his trousers and shirt from the night before. His pants were somewhere else in the room, but he couldn't locate them quickly so he went without. Once he was in the hallway, he hurried downstairs to the kitchen. It was a massive space, clearly meant to be used by servants or house elves given the way it was tucked away in a back room, but James enjoyed moving around the space.

He'd never expected to like cooking very much. When he'd lived with Lily, she made most of their meals. She was a good cook, but an *excellent* baker, and she would spend hours in the kitchen making baked goods. She said it calmed her down when she was stressed, that it gave her a sense of control.

It wasn't until he was living alone at Grimmauld that he started cooking for himself. He'd picked it up quickly to his continued surprise. It was even better in Black Manor when he had ample room to try things out.

He got right to work that morning, pulling eggs and sausage out of one of the charms cabinets, along with a loaf of bread he'd baked two days prior, charming a knife to slide it for toast. He had the sausage frying on the stove and was looking through the charmed cabinet for his fruit options when he heard someone open the door behind him.

James half expected to see Regulus entering the kitchen, but it was Harry dressed in a pair of old pajamas, his glasses still smudged from the day before.

"Good morning," James said cheerfully. Maybe too cheerfully. Harry's eyes narrowed.

"Didn't you wear those clothes yesterday?" Harry asked without preamble.

James turned back toward the stove to hide the way his cheeks tinged pink. "Did you sleep well?"

Harry was quiet for a long second before responding. "Not really," he said finally. "Hermione was still upset, she didn't fall asleep till after midnight." He paused for a moment and James could practically feel the tension in the air. "Regulus was supposed to bring us tea."

"Was he?" James asked lightly.

"Yep," Harry said judgmentally.

"He must have forgotten," James said, plating a few sausages and dumping the rest into the pan.

Harry hummed thoughtfully, but then he dropped into silence again. It seemed to go on for so long that for a moment James thought that he'd left.

"Okay, I've had enough of this," Harry said suddenly, his voice as sharp as glass. James's head snapped over to look at him.

"What?" James replied. Harry looked beyond angry, his eyes narrowed dangerously and his hands clenched into fists. He looked like he was about to throw a punch. James was glad he was on the other side of the room.

"You're all acting like this is normal, like nothing is going on. Am I the only one willing to talk about this?" Harry shouted.

James startled. "What are you talking about?" James said. Harry stalked forward, away from the kitchen door and halfway to where James was standing.

"Are you serious?" Harry yelled.

"Why are you shouting?" James said back, perhaps a bit too loudly. The kitchen door swung open and Draco stepped into the room, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"You're being very loud," Draco muttered snidely. He was wearing green silk pajamas, they looked almost like a suit, and James immediately knew that Regulus had purchased them for him. He'd never seen Regulus wear pajamas like that, he wondered how he'd known that that was what Draco liked. He was suddenly hit with the image of Regulus as a child wearing matching pajama sets like a good little pureblood. It was so adorable that he almost laughed.

"Get out of here," Harry growled at Draco. Draco's face turned red, but he didn't react beyond rolling his eyes.

"Everyone can hear you screaming, it's not my fault," Draco said.

"Just go back to your bedroom," Harry snarled.

"I'm not just going to stay in the bedroom just because you're upset, Potter," Draco spat. He'd clenched his fists as well, and he and Harry were leaning menacingly toward each

other.

“What is going on in here?” Sirius said suddenly. James hadn’t noticed him enter the kitchen. Harry and Draco both started arguing over each other, James couldn’t make out what they were saying. He was overwhelmed, still in shock at Harry shouting at him.

“I think your sausages are burning,” Remus said gently as he entered the kitchen as well. Sirius was trying to get between Draco and Harry. James spun around to find that Remus was correct. He yelped, pulling them off the stove as quickly as possible.

“Fine! I don’t want to be down here anyway!” Draco shouted before leaving the kitchen in a huff.

“What is wrong with you?” Sirius asked Harry, not unkindly, but his eyebrows were raised like he wasn’t impressed. Harry didn’t respond, so James tried to help.

“He was saying—” James started to say.

“When I said that Regulus shouldn’t go alone, I didn’t mean for *you* to go with him,” Harry said to Sirius, sounding less angry and more frustrated.

“What’s wrong with me going?” Sirius said, clearly offended.

“Oh, I see,” Remus said softly.

“I never wanted—You and Remus *just* got married,” Harry argued. “I didn’t think you’d take what I said that way.”

“Wait, you were the one who said Regulus shouldn’t go alone?” James asked. Why wasn’t he ever filled in on any of these conversations?

Harry groaned and turned to look at him. “Well, I thought one of you would catch on, but apparently you’re all more than happy to let Regulus go out there and *die*.”

“Die?” James asked, wounded. He knew it was a risk, but Harry was speaking like it was an inevitability.

“He’s not going to die,” Sirius said softly. “I’ll be there with him.”

Harry growled in frustration, throwing his hands up in the air. “I don’t want you to go with him.”

“Why not?”

“Because it was supposed to be James,” Harry yelled, throwing his hands out toward where James stood frozen.

“You’re back to calling me James?” James said stupidly.

Harry looked agitated, but a small flash of regret crossed his face. "I'm sorry, I don't mean— It just gets confusing calling you Da—my father."

"I know," James mumbled. "I wanted more time to get to know you."

"It's not that," Harry urged. "It's—listen, Regulus is like my—I don't know how to explain it." "

"Oh," James breathed, leaning back against the counter like he was struggling to stand. Everything felt like it was flying at him, like the conversation couldn't be controlled. "I get it. Regulus is like your father."

Harry looked almost regretful, though James wasn't sure why.

"Sorry, what does this have to do with me going with Regulus?" Sirius interrupted.

"Because Harry thinks James should go," Remus supplied evenly. He had a curious look on his face, measured, like he was still taking it all in but could see what each of them was struggling to understand and convey.

"But why?" Sirius asked. He didn't sound accusatory, but James still felt a bit stung.

Harry looked around at the three of them like an animal caught in a trap. James didn't understand, he didn't feel like it was that much of a loaded question. He clearly felt strong enough about it to come down here and yell at James unprompted, why did he look unsure now?

He gave James an apologetic look, which didn't bode well honestly, before pointing his finger right at James's chest, "He's still wearing his clothes from yesterday."

The silence after he said it was deafening. Sirius just looked confused, but from the way Remus's eyebrows climbed up his forehead, James knew that he knew.

"I mean, it was a long night for everyone—"

"Sirius," Remus said softly, his lips twitching like they were all about to be caught out doing a prank after curfew.

"What?" Sirius asked, turning to look at his husband. They stared at each other for a long few seconds—James wanted to sink into the floor—before Sirius slowly turned back to look at him, an unreadable expression on his face. "You're still wearing your clothes from yesterday."

"Erm, yes," James said carefully. He should have never left the bed that morning.

"What were doing?" Sirius asked perilously.

James tried to put aside the part of him that wanted to run from the room. He wasn't a prey animal. Not all the time. He drew himself up slightly. "It's none of your business."

Sirius's mouth dropped open and his eyes widened comically. "You were with Reggie," he hissed. "He's a child!"

"We're both adults!" James replied.

"Can you freak out about this later?" Harry said as if he hadn't been the one to throw James under the bus. "Do you see now why James should go with him?"

"I'm not sending him off to have... *alone time* with my brother," Sirius said.

"Sirius, I thought you said you were fine with this if it happened again," Remus said, still looking deeply amused.

"And I thought you were my husband," Sirius said darkly, turning to look back at Remus. "You're supposed to keep my secrets."

Remus smiled indulgently, even James felt charmed by it. Sirius would never be able to resist. He stepped closer so that he could rub Sirius's shoulders. "Maybe Harry has a point. James is a fully capable wizard. He'll keep Regulus safe."

"I would have kept him safe," Sirius said quietly, his shoulders dropping.

"We all know that," Remus said, "but you can't deny that, under the circumstances, you and Regulus would be itching to get back if you were to go together."

Sirius dropped his head forward for a moment, before looking back up at Remus. James couldn't see his face, but he could see the way his body relaxed against Remus's as if all the tension had been siphoned out. Sirius looked at Harry next.

"And you're okay with this?" Sirius asked carefully.

Harry shrugged, unsure of himself. "I would rather Regulus not leave at all, but I know I can't stop him. I think," he lowered his voice to a whisper like he was confessing horrible, "James would work very hard to keep him alive. Maybe even harder than you would." He looked so deeply ashamed that James wanted to go to him. "I'm sorry."

Sirius softened. "It's okay," he said. "I always want you to be able to be honest with us."

Harry gave him a sideways smile but it didn't reach his eyes.

James still felt frozen. It was as if he was a painting hung on the wall, incapable of changing the world, only allowed to watch. Within a few minutes, his entire future had been changed, and he'd done very little to affect it. Not that he would turn down the opportunity to go with Regulus. If everyone thought it was a good idea, then he would gladly go. He didn't want to say goodbye to him, especially not so soon.

Now all that was left was to tell him.

He shoved some food in his mouth as he made his way back up to Regulus's bedroom. He was wondering how Regulus had managed to sleep through all the yelling when it had

seemed to wake everyone else in the house beyond Hermione, but when he opened Regulus's bedroom door, he understood why.

There was a subtle charm layered against the walls that buffered any noises. It felt recent, maybe it had even been cast last night when they'd stumbled into the room together. When James shut the door behind him, all noise was reduced to a very low buzz.

Clever, he thought.

Regulus was still in a deep sleep, but he'd shifted so that he was lying on his back, his arms spread out like a bird preparing to take flight. His dark mark was on full display. James hadn't seen it since before they both died, but it looked more painful now, even though the last time he'd seen it was fresh and irritated.

Now, it was raised on his skin and the edges, which were red and inflamed last time, were turning a dark blue-black. It was like his veins were being slowly poisoned from the magic in the mark, it looked infected.

It upset James to see it, but not the way it had before. He wasn't angry anymore, he only felt sympathy and an odd possessiveness that felt inappropriate given the circumstances.

How dare someone else mark Regulus? He didn't belong to any of them, especially not Voldemort. He belonged to himself. *He belonged to James.*

James crawled into bed next to him, pulling the quilt around his hips so that he could feel the warmth coming off of Regulus's naked body. He placed a soft kiss against each of Regulus's fingers on his right hand, then started working his way up his palm, wrist, and forearm. When he reached his shoulder, Regulus made a soft noise of confusion.

"James?" he said, his voice thick with sleep.

"Regulus," James responded.

"What time is it?" Regulus said softly, running his fingers through the hairs at the base of James's neck.

"It's still early," James said. "I had to get up to make breakfast."

Regulus hummed and James could no longer resist him, abandoning the stretches of his skin and placing an urgent kiss on Regulus's lips. Regulus groaned into his mouth instantly, losing himself the moment he felt James. It didn't last though. James would have loved to take him again, but Regulus seemed to be coming back to full consciousness faster than James would have liked.

He pulled away, panic in his eyes that James didn't understand at first.

When Regulus tried to pull the quilt up higher to hide his chest and arms, James quickly said, "It's okay. I don't mind."

Regulus's expression soured. "Don't lie," he muttered. James wanted to argue, but Regulus was already climbing out of bed, taking the quilt with him, wrapping it around his body so it looked like he was wearing a ball gown. He hurried into the en-suite bathroom while James fell back against the bed with a sigh.

"I have to tell you something," he said, shouting it through the door.

"What?" Regulus said after a short pause.

James swallowed heavily. He wasn't sure how to start. "It's about you leaving," James said carefully. The pause that followed was even longer this time.

"What about it?" Regulus asked.

"Did you know that Harry was the reason Sirius decided to go?"

"I suspected."

"Hm, well, I didn't know that, but apparently he didn't actually mean for Sirius to go."

Regulus opened the bathroom door. He was dressed now, the long expanse of his skin gone from view.

"So Sirius isn't going?" Regulus surmised.

"No, he's not going," James responded, sitting up so he could get a better look at Regulus's face.

Regulus looked thoughtful and a bit confused, but he didn't seem angry. "That's okay," he said slowly like he was rolling the words on his tongue before saying them. "I'm fine being alone. I didn't need him to come."

"Oh, well, you won't be alone," James said, realizing how he'd accidentally misled him.

Regulus's eyebrows furrowed. "Sorry?"

"I'm going with you," James said bluntly.

"What?" Regulus said. James wasn't sure how he was taking the news, his face was completely unreadable.

James smiled, hoping if he didn't overreact, that Regulus wouldn't either. "I talked with Harry, Sirius, and Remus. We all agree that I should go with you."

"Why?" Regulus asked.

"I was almost Auror, I'm a trained wizard, I won't slow you down," James argued gently. "And after last night," he added boldly, "I don't want to let you go."

Regulus's cheeks turned pink. "What? Last night? James, I only—that was a fluke."

“A fluke?” James tilted his head confusedly.

“Yes,” Regulus said like he was begging James to understand him, “I thought I was never going to see you again.” He seemed to realize what he said just as the knife of his words settled into the center of James’s chest.

“Oh,” James breathed.

“No, that’s not—”

“It’s okay,” James said quickly. Regulus took a step toward him but James jumped up from the bed. He had to get out of there. “It’s—it’s fine. I understand.”

“No, James—”

James didn’t stick around to hear what he had to say. He wasn’t sure how else Regulus’s words could be taken, and he was afraid of what else might come out of his mouth. He rushed out of the room and hurried to his own bedroom. It wasn’t far, but it provided enough space for him to pull in a painful breath. Regulus didn’t actually want him. He’d only slept with him because he was planning to leave.

James felt cheap, he felt used. He didn’t regret shagging him, he’d wanted it for so long that it felt like finally releasing a band of tension around his chest. But the knowledge that Regulus hadn’t planned on keeping him made him feel like he was being squeezed by a giant snake, the air choking out of his lungs.

He allowed himself to have a small panic attack in his bedroom, a tiny sulk after that, then he did what he always did, what he’d done the last time he felt heartbroken over Regulus. He put it away, somewhere deep on a shelf in his mind, where it couldn’t destroy him beyond repair.

They had to leave today, within a few hours. Soon it would be just them and James had to figure out a way to not allow their tenuous friendship to fall into disrepair.

Regulus had warned him that he had nothing to give to James. It was James’s fault for failing to take him seriously. Though Regulus had made the first move the night before, James knew he shouldn’t have let them fall into bed together. He was sure that he knew better.

Everything had become so complicated all at once and James had never felt so foolish.

He packed quickly. James knew that Regulus had been packing for weeks preparing to leave, so James didn’t worry about packing more than the clothes he needed and a few books he was still reading. At the end of the day, there wasn’t much that belonged to him. It was like he was barely a member of the world, a member of this family.

He shoved away the morose thoughts. He didn’t want Harry to see how upset he was, Harry would dwell on it—Sirius and Regulus were constantly going on about Harry’s propensity for rumination. He didn’t want Harry to worry.

Remus would likely see right through him, he had an uncanny ability to lock onto people's secrets. Hopefully, he could keep Sirius in the dark until after they were gone.

He checked the time. It was still morning, though the day had already felt so long.

James shrunk down his bag quickly and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He was dressed in muggle clothes, but with dragon hide boots that Regulus had purchased for him. He didn't know where they were going, but he thought thick clothes would serve him well wherever they went.

He headed to Draco's room next. It was one of the more extravagant guest bedrooms, only a few doors down from Harry's bedroom. The door was made of three different types of wood, fused together with magic to create a thick magical barrier between the room and the rest of the house. It provided an extra layer of safety for him, making it harder for unwanted guests and those who might do him harm to get through the doorway.

James knocked twice, a soft sound, and waited. He'd never expected Draco to invite him weeks ago but about a week after they moved him into Black Manor he'd quietly asked James if he wanted to play a game of chess together in his room.

James thought it made Draco feel safe to have his own space. Especially once it was fully decorated in extravagant greens, golds, and silvers. James thought it was a bit ugly, but he would have never said that out loud. If Draco liked it, then he was more than happy to be welcomed in.

It took a moment for the sound of the doorknob turning to reach his ears.

"Yes?" Draco asked. His eyes were red but James didn't know if it was from exhaustion or if he'd been crying.

"Can we talk?" James asked.

"I suppose so," Draco drawled, moving away from the door and leaving it open just a sliver for James to slip through.

"How much did you hear of our conversation this morning?" James asked once the door was closed behind him. Draco shrugged. "There has been a change of plans. Sirius is no longer going with Regulus."

"Is he going alone?" Draco asked, one blonde eyebrow quirked slightly.

"No, I'm going with him."

"No," Draco said, showing his first real sign of emotion as unhappy shock crossed his features. "You can't both leave me with these—these people!"

"Draco," James said carefully.

"Please, it's lonely enough as it is."

James felt for him, his heart clenching. He'd experienced that same loneliness and he didn't envy Draco.

"You won't be completely alone. Remus, Sirius—"

"They don't want to talk to me," Draco mumbled.

"They just don't know you yet," James said. Draco threw himself down on a settee right in front of the empty fireplace. He was more dramatic than Sirius. "Give them a chance."

"I don't want to," Draco pouted.

"I know," James said soothingly. There didn't seem to be much else to say.

"When do you think you'll be back?" Draco asked after a moment.

James wasn't sure how to answer him. He feared that he might never return, but he wasn't morbid enough to think about it. It wouldn't do either of them any good to have a breakdown in front of a teenager.

"I'm not sure," he answered honestly.

Once he was done saying his goodbyes to Draco, he headed downstairs. Everyone else was already waiting for him. Remus with his arm around Sirius, Harry whispering to Regulus as the two of them embraced, and Hermione, who was frowning thoughtfully. James's heart jumped, a split second of panic making it through the barrier he'd created for himself. What if he didn't come back?

He said a quick goodbye to Hermione first. They didn't know each other well yet, he'd been planning to get to know where after Regulus and Sirius had left, but they were out of time now. She went to Regulus once they were done, while Harry walked over to him, an uncertain look on his face.

"Are you upset with me?" Harry asked bluntly.

James almost laughed. "Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"I shouldn't have told Sirius about your clothes."

James did laugh then, he couldn't help it. "It's okay, I understand why you did. I'm only sorry that we won't get to spend any time together this year. I was looking forward to flying together some more."

Harry looked devastated. James had meant it to be a lighthearted statement. He hadn't wanted to hurt him.

"No, I'm sorry," James said. He hugged him. "I'm happy to be going with Regulus. I'll miss you, that's all."

Harry didn't say anything for a moment, but he hugged James back tightly. "I'll miss you too."

James was almost glad to be separated from Harry as he walked to the floo with Regulus, Sirius, and Remus. If he'd spent any more time in his presence, he would have broken down crying, and that wouldn't help anyone.

Sirius and Regulus talked quietly to each other as they headed down the hill. Both of them seemed steady, unaffected, but James knew it was just a mask. All of them were pretending like this was okay, like being thrown back into a war was normal.

"Goodbye, little brother," Sirius said to Regulus, hugging him once before Regulus followed Remus into the shack. Sirius turned to James then. "You'll take care of him." It wasn't a question.

"You know I will," James said, then because that didn't feel serious enough, he added, "I'll die before I let anything happen to him."

"I'd rather if you both stayed alive actually," Sirius said with a smirk. It seemed almost mocking, but James knew it was because Sirius was trying desperately to hide everything else he was feeling. When the two of them hugged, it felt like a final goodbye. James hoped to Merlin, to Godric Gryffindor, to Magic herself that it wasn't. He wanted to see Sirius again.

"I love you," James said simply. He didn't think he could say the word 'goodbye.' Sirius let out a small, watery laugh.

"I love you too."

James headed to the floo quickly after that. Sirius stayed outside. James followed Remus and Regulus through the floo to Grimmauld, and after that, they apparated together to a part of London James had never been. He'd barely taken in the area before Remus was casting a spell on Regulus.

"What are you doing?" James asked. Remus turned to look at him as Regulus blinked blearily.

"It's a memory charm," Remus said, almost sounding regretful. "We've agreed that it's too dangerous for either of you to remember where Black Manor is. Or Grimmauld since it's attached to the floo at Black Manor, even though I'm the only one that can go through."

James swallowed nervously. "Will I still remember who's there?" James asked.

"Yes," Remus said, "but try not to think about Harry and the others if you get captured. It's best if no one knows."

James nodded once. Remus squeezed his shoulder. James was sure it meant 'I'll miss you.'

"Okay?" Remus asked. James nodded again. "Okay. Look into my eyes."

James did and a blink later Remus was gone, leaving Regulus and James standing on a random street in London. It was only them now, no one else could help them. He took in the wreckage that lay in the air between them and Regulus looked back, his eyes dimmed and serious.

James took a steadying breath.

“So, what now?”

Chapter End Notes

what now indeed

the death.

Chapter Notes

if there are errors in this chapter, it's because my beta is on vacation again.

Regulus had never been a good sleeper, when he was a child, it would take him hours to fall asleep, and now, as an adult, it was even worse. He found that the only way to fall asleep was to trick himself into it. He used to imagine himself curled up in bed, James crawling in behind him, wrapping his warm arm around Regulus's middle and pulling him up against his chest. He'd used that specific scenario for far longer than he wanted to admit, but now that things were so corroded between them, he didn't find it so comforting.

Now, he would imagine himself dying. Not violently or even suddenly, just a slow, peaceful death. He would picture his body settling onto the forest floor, decaying into the earth and the dirt, feeding wild animals and insects as his body returned to nothing. He imagined himself forgotten; his body vanished, and along with it, all of his misdeeds.

They'd been in the tent for three weeks and had yet to exchange more than a few necessary words with each other. Regulus felt like he was suffocating.

He'd regretted the words he'd spoken to James before they left. He hadn't meant to say them, he was just surprised in the moment. Watching James's face fall had made something dark and haunted open in his stomach, and now he had no idea how to fix it. He still couldn't bring himself to regret sleeping with James. Even with the awkwardness between them. His death still felt imminent, so taking the moment of intimacy he'd been avoiding — denying himself — for so long still comforted him.

However, that didn't help that chill that seemed a permanent fixture in the tent now. The cold world outside wasn't helping either. After the dementors abandoned Azkaban and started roaming freely through the country, the weather shifted. It had started back when they were still at Black Manor, but it was getting worse by the day. Storm clouds and icy winds were becoming commonplace even though it was still August.

September was on the horizon, and with it, the new Hogwarts term. Regulus tried not to think about it too much. He knew things would get more dangerous once he, Harry, Hermione, and Draco didn't return to school. He didn't know if Tom Riddle had made any moves to take the school yet, but the moment he realized who was missing from the new term, the pressure would be on.

Not that things were easy currently either, but he was certain that the pressure he was feeling now had very little to do with Tom Riddle, surprisingly, and much more to do with the

shadows making a home on James's face.

Regulus didn't like the look of them. They didn't bode well for the future of their friendship, which was a shame because he'd failed to realize how much he relied on his friendship with James to help him through the previous few months until that support was ripped out from under him.

He'd known that introducing sex into the equation of their relationship wasn't a good idea, but he hadn't expected to deal with the consequences of such a choice. Although, now that he thought about it, that seemed a bit short-sighted.

It's just that he thought James would carry on as he always had, he'd lived through Regulus's death just fine last time. He'd thought that, at worst, James might be a little disappointed that Regulus didn't come home but that he'd be relieved not to have to deal with the complicated knots that made up their relationship with each other.

Then again, that didn't sound like the James Regulus interacted with on a daily basis.

Perhaps Regulus didn't really consider what the real James would want, maybe he'd just made up a version of James that would look at his memories of Regulus with fondness, one who would see their one night together as reminiscing of times passed.

That was, in actuality, not very aligned with the way James was in the real world. Regulus had spent so long idolizing him and beating himself up, wallowing in self-flagellation as a form of comfort, that he'd forgotten the rotten little pieces of James that most of the world didn't see. Sirius certainly didn't, he and Regulus were alike in that way. They both saw James as perfect when he was far from it.

Out of everyone Regulus knew, only Severus came to mind as someone who might see James a bit more clearly.

Severus used to complain that James was an arrogant boy who strutted about the castle like he owned the place. This wasn't *not* true. Though Regulus never paid Severus's complaints much mind, mostly because he didn't mind watching James strutting about, he did always love beautiful things. Plus, back then, he'd been a sad, lonely little boy who spent too much time pining for things he could never have.

But he wasn't a sad, lonely little boy anymore. He was a grown man who'd suffered through war, who'd died to betray his master, who'd given everything to keep a child alive, one he had no connection to beyond the deeply seated love he felt for the boy's father.

Regulus had no problem seeing James's flaws now. Unfortunately for Regulus, they did nothing to push him away. For others, seeing flaws was a way to free themselves from the confines of their romantic feelings for the person, but when Regulus noticed the cracks in James's exterior, all he wanted to do was dig his fingernails into those little spaces and make them wider, cause more damage, break it all apart so he could see the soft, squishy interior of James's body.

A bit morbid, he chided himself, but honest. He wasn't a good man, he'd never been under misgivings about that. Why start now?

See, James was a good little boy, he had been when he started Hogwarts. A child who shined with love and acceptance, someone who could see the worst in people and turn it into something good if he was so inclined. He'd taken all the wounds Sirius had been left with after growing up under the care of Walburga and Orion, and he'd patched them up, fixed them so they weren't so glaring. Then he'd created a nice fluffy cloud for Sirius to land in every time that learned cruelty reared its ugly head.

From the outside looking in, James was nothing but a bright light in the world, nothing but good.

But James had been raised alone, an only child to two loving and attentive parents who saw him as a miracle, he'd come to them so late in life, they thought they'd have to go without. He was the chosen one to them, the perfect child.

That kind of love wasn't always good. It could twist things, overbreed them, make them look soft like rotting wood.

James was a little like that. A little spoiled, a little rotten. Just like Regulus.

And now Regulus had done the one thing one should never do when dealing with a little spoiled boy. He'd given him exactly what he wanted — what he thought he wanted, at least — and then he'd taken it away, snatched it out from under him, right out of his clawing fingertips.

The shadows on James's face were dark and impressive, demented even, but to Regulus, they were the evidence of a boy who hadn't gotten what he wanted and was going to pout until Regulus changed his mind.

Not that Regulus wasn't going to change his mind, just to be clear, he was just very far from the decision of which he needed to change from. He was unclear on which path he'd set himself on, to begin with, and which way he needed to turn to find the correct path, the wanted path.

So yes, the tent was cold and a little unforgiving, and James kept giving him dark, cloying, desperate looks that were meant to make him feel everything James was feeling, but Regulus had never minded the cold much. It wasn't that he wanted James to suffer, but he saw a piece of himself reflected back in the looks James gave him, and he was comforted by it.

Not to mention that it made it easier to avoid feeling his own emotions about the situation. Did he want James? He couldn't tell, but it didn't matter, because James was too upset with him for any action to be taken. James was laying out a coward's path for him without even realizing it, and Regulus was likely on the wrong path already, what was a few more steps in the wrong direction?

Regulus hadn't shared his plans of living in a tent while on his journey to kill Tom Riddle with anyone. At first, it was only going to be him, and he'd quickly come to terms with the fact that he would have to leave Grimmauld Place behind when he started hunting the man. He decided on a tent for his living situation because he knew it would allow him to move around the country easily, moving wherever he was needed.

He hadn't shared that bit of information because it frankly didn't seem relevant.

Then Sirius had joined the team, and Regulus couldn't let go of the idea that it would be extremely funny to tell Sirius that he would have to live in a tent for, potentially, *months* before he was allowed to return home to his loving husband.

He hadn't been expecting to bring a jilted ex-lover into the tent with him. It didn't seem so funny now that they were living in a tent with only a set of bunk beds next to a cottage-like kitchenette. It wasn't a big tent, even with the abilities magic provided him. He'd wanted to travel light. So it didn't even have a spare room, just the living space with the beds, a small couch and overstuffed chair in front of a furnace, and a small place tucked behind the kitchen that had a bathroom with a tiny shower.

Despite its size and the dread Regulus felt introducing James to their new living situation, it actually wasn't too uncomfortable. Though he'd grown up with material comforts, he didn't think he'd mind living in such a small space. Of course, James's presence complicated things a bit, but not by much. They rarely slept at the same time, even with the benefit of two beds, because one of them was almost always awake, keeping an eye on things, and even when they were both awake, they stayed out of each other's way.

He could always expand the tent if things got really dire. He hadn't shared that fact with James either.

Perhaps he just liked to keep him close.

Time seemed to move slowly and quickly all at once. They were isolated, both from the world and from each other. There was no way to contact anyone beyond the small charmed Galleons Hermione had invented in fifth year. They'd modified them so they could only be read by the person they were intended for, but even those were extremely restrictive.

At present, he was only using them to send weekly updates to Sirius to let him know that he and James were still alive and still looking.

Sirius would send back an update too, but Regulus wasn't worried about him.

Every few days, they would leave the relative safety of the tent—camped somewhere near James's childhood home—and would venture out into the muggle and wizarding worlds to steal supplies and newspapers. James never liked to *actually* steal stuff, though. So when he went under the invisibility cloak into a nearby town to take things, he would always leave a few coins behind.

Regulus never bothered.

“School’s started,” James said blandly one morning. Regulus was cooking breakfast for them or trying to. He was still struggling with the action of cooking. James was much better at it, but he didn’t want James to feel like he was doing all the work, so Regulus always did his fair share.

“Oh,” Regulus replied, just as blandly. The eggs he was trying to fry were sticking to the pan, and he was starting to subtly scrape at the metal, trying to unstick them.

“How long till they notice you’re not there?” There was no inflection in his voice, but Regulus was sure he could hear the words ‘*Do you want me to take over breakfast?*’ hiding underneath his unproblematic question.

“They probably noticed the moment the train left the station,” Regulus responded, turning slightly so his body was blocking James’s view of the stove. Not that that would hide the smell.

James hummed disinterestedly. The eggs finally came unstuck, but Regulus could feel the smallest twinge of magic under his spatula, meaning it was James’s doing. He sighed under his breath.

“Anything new?” he asked, throwing the overcooked eggs onto two plates. James never complained about his cooking. Regulus found that surprising, if the roles were reversed, he would complain. He supposed that’s where he and James differed.

“They’re releasing a biography on Dumbledore. Rita Skeeter wrote it.”

Regulus felt mild surprise, but then again, Dumbledore was an important public figure. It made sense. He wondered if they would find anything of use in a book like that. Rita wasn’t known to be the most factual writer, but still—

He opened his mouth to say so, but James was already speaking. “We can probably steal one when it comes out.”

Regulus nodded slowly to himself. That was good enough for now.

He sat across from James at the two-person table in the center of the room, placing both of their plates down as he moved. James only glanced up from the paper long enough to grab a fork. There was a directionlessness to their movements, not just in their journey to kill Tom Riddle, but in the way they moved around each other. Neither of them felt like they could go very far, they also couldn’t get any closer.

Not until they talked, and Regulus wasn’t really sure how to approach such a thing. What was there to say anyway? *Sorry, I said I only slept with you because I thought I was going to die and never have to deal with the consequences of my own actions, it actually had very little to do with you.* That seemed a bit harsh.

Sorry, I used you for your body. That might be even harsher. And it made Regulus hard to even think it, so that was out.

It might help him if he knew what James was expecting here. He'd already drawn the line between friends and whatever they were way back when, to cross it now would require... decision-making and emotional maturity. It would require time, not several weeks or months alone in a tent time, but real-time. Time that meant he was going to live beyond the war and build a life for himself.

Surely, James didn't want a man heading for the gallows.

It would be helpful if he knew. But he wasn't going to *ask*.

"Any new ideas for finding Death Eaters?" James said when he got up to clean their plates. That's generally how they split the chores. One of them cooked, and one of them cleaned. James always did the dishes by hand. Regulus always used magic.

"No," Regulus confessed, the only real emotion he'd shown so far that day. "If we could figure out how to track their attacks, we might get lucky."

They were looking for the Lestrage brothers. They had to destroy the last Horcrux before they could make a move against Tom Riddle and his stupid snake. Regulus was betting on it being in the Lestrage vault. He was sure that's where Bellatrix would have put it, now he just had to hope that it was still there.

Would Tom Riddle have moved it since her death? He had no idea, and he didn't like to think about it.

For now, they were focusing on killing the Lestrage brothers. James hadn't said how he felt about the prospect of murder, one way or another, but Regulus wasn't dwelling on that either. He was going to kill them, he had no qualms about that, and he wasn't going to let James's potential judgment stop him from doing so.

Once both brothers were dead, Sirius could take their vaults. There were three Lestrage vaults, the main one, and two extras put aside for each brother. They had no heirs and no next of kin, the closest thing was Sirius as head of the Black family. They could revert back to him, given Bellatrix's marriage into the family. It was a bit of potentially unethical bank maneuvering, but Regulus and Sirius were well beyond making ethical decisions.

Besides, Tom Riddle's death outweighed nearly any bad thing they could do.

"There must be a pattern to them."

"I know," Regulus said, although he didn't. Not really. They'd felt random to him before, when he was a Death Eater, but he'd never been very included in the planning.

There were so many unanswered questions for them right now, it felt like they were just treading water.

"What about the sword?" Regulus asked. "Any ideas about that?"

They'd been discussing the sword of Gryffindor for nearly a month, but both of them seemed to be without answers. Why Dumbledore had left it for him and what he was supposed to use

it for, and where it might be all sat like empty chairs at a dinner table.

James almost always shook his head, his eyebrows furrowed. Neither of them knew how to parse through Dumbledore's thought processes. What he had planned for them was always a mystery, and even as time slid through their fingers and they failed to make any real progress, they still couldn't find the answers.

They found a copy of Dumbledore's biography the second week of September. *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*. It was an interesting title, probably more accurate than Rita truly intended. Regulus started reading it instantly, thankful that James wasn't much of a reader and that he was more than happy to give it up.

Rita's writing, though overdramatic and excessive, did make it an easy read, and he found himself flying through it. He devoured the sections about Dumbledore's youth, intrigued by his dark past with Grindelwald. Regulus couldn't help but relish in the revelation that Dumbledore wasn't as perfect as people thought he was. He found a kinship there, an acceptance in the mistakes Dumbledore had made.

Although, when he made it to the section about Dumbledore's relationship with Harry, Regulus nearly burned the book to ashes.

He slammed it closed without finishing it, tossing it off the side of his bed.

"Done?" James asked him. They were both awake, but both of them were sitting in their beds, James on the top bunk. Regulus couldn't see him from this angle, but he felt like he could feel James's body heat coming off in waves above him.

"For now," Regulus said through gritted teeth. More angry than he meant to sound. He wondered if James would question him on it, but he remained startlingly silent. That had been happening more and more as time went on. Like he was holding something back. Regulus wasn't going to dig it out of him. He waited patiently for James to present whatever inane thing was working its way out of his system.

It wasn't until October set in that James finally said what he needed to say. They'd been visiting the locations of Death Eater attacks, days after they took place, hoping to find clues, to find some trail to follow, but they kept coming up empty. Regulus was spending an unnatural amount of time feeling lonely, which was a feeling he was well acquainted with but was made infinitely worse by James's estranged presence.

He was aching somewhere deep under his ribs, and he barely even registered it before James sat down in the overstuffed chair in front of the furnace and said with a sigh, "I think we need to go to Godric's Hollow."

Regulus glanced up at him slowly. His eyes ached from lack of sleep. He'd started to feel too agitated to truly rest after the end of September passed. He was worried about everyone. He missed them. James was upset with him, and Regulus had let it fester for too long, and now he would never be able to fix it. Honestly, he should have just snuck away in the middle of the night, he shouldn't have let anyone come with him. He would have been better off if

James wasn't there, if he was still at home, if he had time to miss Regulus rather than rot in his presence.

If he could do it over again—

“Regulus,” James said. Regulus blinked. James had moved forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees like he meant business. He was staring at Regulus expectantly.

“Huh?” Regulus said inarticulately.

“When was the last time you slept?” James asked, not unkindly. Regulus bristled regardless. He never liked incurring judgment, especially not from James. It always felt like the sharp sting of a thorn on a rose bush. Beauty in *I love you, I want you, you're mine*, pain in *I wish you were different, better, perfect. Easier to love*. “Are you here with me?”

“I am,” Regulus said automatically, then backtracked through his missed moments. His mind had been wandering a lot lately, it did that when he was lonely, like it was moving down a path through the woods, trying to find a warm cabin he could sleep in for the night. “Why Godric’s Hollow?”

“I was thinking about the sword.”

“Home of Godric Gryffindor,” Regulus supplied instantly, like he already knew where James’s mind had gone.

“And the Dumbledores,” James offered. Something about his even tone irritated Regulus.

“And you and your wife,” Regulus said evenly.

James didn’t react, not outwardly. “Yes.”

Regulus narrowed his eyes. “You think the sword will be there?”

“I think it’s possible,” James said, bobbing his head from side to side like he was weighing their options. “That’s not all, though.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows questioningly. He wondered if he would break out into hives if he thought about visiting the home James and Lily built together long enough.

“Last time I went there, someone else showed up,” James said, as unemotionally as if he were discussing the weather.

“What?” Regulus snapped, every emotion in his body felt like it was trying to cut him. Every expression on his face was like he was tearing himself open.

“I forgot about it,” James said. Regulus doubted that. “I apparated away the moment I heard someone arrive. I wasn’t supposed to be there, so I knew I couldn’t get caught. But it was suspicious. They might have some kind of magic detector on the house, someone might be watching it.”

“The Death Eaters?”

“Or someone that Dumbledore would have trusted with the sword.”

Regulus doubted that even more. It seemed more likely that the Death Eaters would be keeping tabs on places they thought Harry might visit. Especially given that Regulus and Harry had been attacked by a Dementor in Godric’s Hollow only a few short years ago.

“If you don’t want to go—”

“I’ll go,” Regulus snapped before he could consider what going really entailed. James watched him like he knew Regulus had responded too quickly, too impulsively. Regulus tipped his chin up. He felt rubbed raw, every ugly piece of him on display for a man who’d had him and was seemingly well-adjusted to losing him.

James had been so angry at him, to begin with, but now he watched Regulus with that measured, featureless expression that grated on his nerves. Regulus hadn’t realized that he’d been losing ground until James had retreated completely, leaving Regulus stranded out on a battlefield alone and without armor.

And now James wanted Regulus to visit the life James should have lived, the one he was meant to live, the one that involved Regulus floating somewhere in a watery grave, bloated full of water, disfigured beyond recognition.

Regulus had spent this long avoiding every piece of James that hurt him. He pretended none of it hurt him. He could keep doing it.

“Fine,” James said finally, his face unreadable as he stood, walking out of the tent.

“We’ll go tomorrow,” Regulus called after him. James didn’t reply.

the death part II.

They apparated to Godric's Hollow in the late afternoon. Regulus's hand was cold in his, their fingers clamped tightly together as they were pulled through space, squeezed, and rebuilt through magic. Regulus's grip felt like he was afraid he might let go on accident.

It wasn't painful exactly but he still felt the need to shake out his hand when Regulus let him go. He noticed Regulus clenching his teeth like he was insulted and the urge to apologize, to explain himself, rushed through him. He ignored it, purposefully and with determination, just as he had been ignoring all of his other urges for weeks now.

There had been so many *urges*. The urge to climb into bed with Regulus, the urge to ask if Regulus still wanted him, the urge to explain all the complicated feelings he had in the pit of his stomach, the urge to tell Regulus about his wants, his fears, his hopes, all of it, the urge to spill the secret of the ritual he'd done with Sirius, the urge to kiss him roughly on the lips, all teeth and tongue, the urge to shove him to the ground like children playing too roughly, the urge to hide, the urge to seek, the urge to steal, keep, hoard.

He hid all of his urges like a well-oiled machine. He kept them locked up tight, waiting for Regulus to ask for the key. He hadn't imagined it taking this long.

Regulus had been, for lack of a better word, deteriorating under the stress of their hunt. James would like to think it was also because of their estrangement from each other—it was so abrupt and so detrimental to James specifically that he could only hope that Regulus was equally impacted, equally possessed by unanswered feelings—but he couldn't be sure so he didn't let himself dwell on it for too long. It was only in the quiet moments of the still mornings when cold air from the outside world would slip in through the gap in the tent door and brush against his exposed skin, that James would allow himself to hope for it, long for Regulus's touch like he might long for a few more hours of rest, a warm cup of tea, and a bit of comfort.

That hope had turned into something darker as the weeks stretched on. He worried about it now, worried about his self-control and the tight grip he had on his urges.

"Which way is it?" Regulus asked. His voice was devoid of emotion, he looked like he was barely awake. He'd looked like that for a few days now, blinking slowly and nodding off in odd positions around the tent. He rarely slept in his bed.

His reflexes might be slow, James thought. He might be in danger if anything goes wrong.

"I thought you had been here before?" James replied. It came out more judgmental than he intended it to. Regulus scowled. James was almost too relieved to see some emotion there. So relieved that he nearly forgot to feel bad for upsetting the man. He didn't *like* to hurt his feelings, but sometimes it felt like the only way he could get through the brick wall Regulus had built between them.

“Only the cemetery,” Regulus muttered. A haunted look crossed his features and James knew he was remembering the dementors. At least James was there this time to protect him should the dementor attack again.

James looked away from him, taking in the area. He’d never had much time to explore Godric’s Hollow and he’d always regretted it. Now, coming back here, even if it was completely safe, felt too much like visiting a tomb. It was Lily’s gravesite and not much else. The whole town belonged to the ghost of the life he might have lived.

He wasn’t mourning it anymore, but that didn’t mean he was free.

They were standing in the center of the road, the streets uncomfortably empty for the time of day, and were only a block or so down from the cemetery. His old cottage wasn’t far from them, but it would probably be a good ten-minute walk before they made it there. It felt like a terribly long time with the silence that hung heavy in the air between them.

Though it had been sunny when they left the campsite—the tent now folded up and kept Regulus’s bag, he didn’t like to leave it behind, even with all the enchantments to hide it—it was very overcast in Godric’s Hollow. It seemed like sunset was almost upon them, but the dark grey clouds kept him from being able to see the sun clearly.

“This way,” he said, taking two steps forward before pausing with a gasp. It wasn’t that late in the year, not nearly winter, yet snow was beginning to fall around them. There wasn’t any snow on the ground making him wonder if this was the first snow of the year. He put his palm out and watched a small flake touch his skin, cold spreading across his hand as the snow melted into water.

“It’s snowing,” Regulus said blankly. James chanced a glance up at him. He looked mildly curious, his eyebrows slightly raised and his lips slightly pursed, but his eyes were dead. James was certain it was the lack of sleep, it could make anyone look that way, but Regulus seemed more affected than most.

“Weird, right?”

“Weird,” Regulus agreed. “It’s likely not a good sign.” Regulus dropped his wand out of his sleeve into his hand like he was gearing up for a fight. James did the same.

They weren’t under the invisibility cloak, though James kept wondering if they should be, but they were wearing thick glamours over their features. No one would be able to recognize them. It made James feel weird though, like looking at Regulus when he looked like someone else was deeply wrong.

They walked slowly through town, keeping their eyes peeled for anyone who might be out and about, but they didn’t see a single soul for those first few minutes. They were almost completely passed the cemetery, though James had been careful not to look its way for too long lest Regulus get upset when Regulus stopped them.

James watched him curiously. He was clearly building up to saying something, but James wasn’t sure what.

He certainly didn't expect Regulus to slowly open his mouth, unclench the previously clenched jaw, to say, "Do you want to go inside?"

"Inside?" James asked stupidly.

Regulus gave him a confused look. "Inside the cemetery."

"Oh," James exclaimed. "Oh," he repeated. "I hadn't thought about it." That was a lie, it had been on his mind for weeks. "But if you'd like, then sure, we can."

Regulus gave him a bewildered look. "If I want to?" he asked incredulously.

James nodded. Regulus continued to stare him down.

"Are you serious?"

"I think so," James responded, though the joke he knew would drive Regulus insane was right on the tip of his tongue. He was glad he didn't say it.

"James—" Regulus growled softly. The noise made James grow warm. He wished he could hear that sound again, and again, under different circumstances. "Come on." He expected Regulus to keep walking toward James's home, but instead, he turned them around and stalked right into the cemetery, beelining for Lily's grave.

He knew that Regulus had been here before. He'd just mentioned it a moment prior, obviously, but he also knew that Regulus and Harry had been attacked here. There was no reason for James to be surprised by Regulus's familiarity with it, yet it did shock him a bit.

He'd been worried about this task, about visiting Godric's Hollow *together*. That seemed like treacherous waters for them, but he didn't see a way around it either. But the stomping ground of himself and Lily being visited by Regulus in one of his worst strops in years didn't seem like an ideal situation.

And yet here Regulus was, walking up to Lily's grave—the enchanted wreath of flowers he'd left there still leaning on the stone—like it didn't even bother him. It was only the slight shake in his fingertips before he shoved them into his jacket pockets that gave him away.

James didn't want him to hurt, he really didn't, and he knew the topic of Lily was likely to only make things worse between them, but what else was he supposed to do? They had to come back, that was the only option right now. Not to mention it was the only real plan they'd had in weeks.

Distractedly, he wondered what Lily would say. He knelt at her grave, brushing a few dead leaves off of the cold stone. Would she judge him for bringing Regulus to their home? Would she be upset? He couldn't imagine she would be.

The wind picked up for a moment, a few more leaves falling around them with the snow. It wasn't sticking to the ground yet, it was too early for that. With a certainty that he rarely felt, James was sure that Lily was cheering him on. It was a bit silly, when he really thought about

it, imagining Lily telling him to go after what he wanted when she was dead beneath his feet, but that's what he felt. He was sure of it.

"Should we head to the cottage?" he asked after a moment, pressing his fingers to the grave one last time before standing. He likely wouldn't get another chance to visit her grave before the war ended. It would be too dangerous. He waited for Regulus to reply but was met with only silence. "Regulus?"

He turned to find that he was alone. Regulus was off in the distance, walking between graves, his hands held tightly behind his stiff back. He looked so, so unhappy. James felt sick.

"What are you doing?" James called. Regulus paused but didn't turn to look at him. "Regulus." He huffed and jogged toward him, skipping between gravestones like they weren't even there. "Hey," he said, placing a hand on Regulus's shoulder. He could feel how tight his muscles were beneath his jacket.

He squeezed his shoulder softly. He probably should just drop his hand, Regulus hadn't seemed like he wanted to be touched recently, but he couldn't get himself to do it. Regulus stood frozen for a long second. "I was only giving you a moment alone," he mumbled finally, his voice low and gravely. He sounded upset.

"I'm done being alone," James said, the words heavy with double meaning.

Regulus nodded once, stiff just like the rest of him. "To the cottage?"

"If you still want to," James replied uncertainly. It was the wrong thing to say. Regulus shook off his hand.

"Which way?" Regulus asked like they hadn't just been walking in that direction.

James sighed under his breath, quiet enough that he didn't think Regulus heard. "Come on."

The street lamps began to turn on as they passed by each of them, the sun beginning to dip below the horizon. It would be fully dark soon. James shivered slightly, he was dressed warmly but not warm enough for winter air. He hadn't been expecting such harsh conditions.

"Who is that?" Regulus whispered. Neither of them stopped, but James subtly followed Regulus's gaze across the street. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw someone standing between two houses. It was a woman, older than dirt, dressed in a full-body coat that dragged slightly on the ground. It swallowed her short, stalky frame.

"I'm not sure."

"It looks like—" He swallowed loudly, looking away from the woman as the two of them continued down the road.

"Like who?" James whispered.

Regulus moved his shoulders in an odd, jerky way. Almost like he was trying to shrug but couldn't quite get it to work correctly. "In Rita's book about Dumbledore, she mentioned

someone. A neighbor.”

“Oh, of course,” James gasped quietly. He’d forgotten about her, but Remus used to say it was fascinating that they lived in the same town as her. “Bathilda Bagshot. She’s a historian, right?”

“Yeah,” Regulus said. “That’s right.”

Neither of them turned to look at her, but James was sure he could feel her eyes on the back of his neck. He almost wondered if she was following them, but he didn’t want to check and see. He felt unsettled, creeped out in a way that was unnecessary for an old, defenseless woman. Still, a thought occurred to him and he couldn’t keep himself from voicing it.

“Do you think she’d have the sword?”

Regulus glanced at him out of the corner of his eye like he was thinking the same thing. “I don’t know,” he said, his voice disturbingly honest. “But I don’t want to speak to her.”

“Why not?” James asked, though he wholeheartedly agreed.

Regulus looked over James’s shoulder toward where Bathilda had been, whatever he saw there made his face pale and he whipped around to face forward again. “I don’t know,” he replied after a beat. “There is something wrong with her.”

James nodded, and because he just couldn’t quite himself, he chanced one look back at her. She hadn’t moved from her place between the two houses, but she’d pushed her head forward like she was trying to listen to him. It was unnatural, uncanny, inhuman.

“Let’s hurry,” he replied. Regulus nodded quickly and together they picked up the pace on the way to his cottage. Despite his pounding heart, he felt an odd kinship having been so frightened by something that had also scared Regulus. It made James feel connected to him.

The cottage was just as James remembered it, half destroyed from the spell that had nearly taken Harry’s life, but still standing somehow against all odds. Sometimes he felt like that, like a piece of him had been blown to bits when he’d died, but he was still here, still walking and talking and loving and longing.

“Why did you choose this house?” Regulus asked. James gave him an uneasy look. It almost felt like a trap, like Regulus was asking as a way to hurt himself. That or James was just projecting. It’s the same thing he did when he would spend hours and hours thinking about Regulus with *Barty* or *Alexander* or *that stupid muggle that Regulus had met in a bar*. He’d just imagine them together as a way to hurt himself.

But then again, Regulus seemed genuine in his question. There was a softness to his eyes as he stared at the destroyed roof. A quiet pain there that James didn’t yet understand.

“Godric’s Hollow is only two towns over from where I grew up, where my parents lived when they were still alive. When Lily and I got married, we wanted something small and

cozy, but we didn't want to be too far from anyone. She wanted to have the option of traveling like a muggle to my parents' house if something happened."

Regulus nodded slowly, but he still looked confused. "But why this cottage?" he asked, looking pained as if he didn't mean to let the question out.

"It just felt right," James said. "I don't know. From the moment I went inside, I could imagine spending time there. It's hard to explain."

For a split second, Regulus's face crumbled, something like devastation attacking his features, but just as soon as it had come, it was gone, replaced by that blank look that James hated more than anything.

"Where were you when someone showed up last time?" he asked, back to the serious matter at hand.

"In Harry's bedroom," James answered automatically. "The nursery." A muscle in Regulus's forehead twitched, but he just nodded like he had all the information he needed. He was so attractive like this, serious and driven. It made James feel a bit dizzy.

Regulus led the way into the house, fearless in the way he held his shoulders, even though this was likely far more intimidating than anything he'd done before. Again, James could have been projecting, but he kept imagining if Regulus and Barty or some other man had owned a home together. He could perfectly picture what it would be like to walk into that space.

He would have rather lit himself on fire.

Regulus approached it like he did everything, with a stubbornness that could not be denied and a bravery that was so carefully crafted that even his own brother had missed it for years.

They moved through the house like two ends of a large snake, Regulus leading the way and James mimicking each of his movements, waiting to see how he would act, where he would lung, what he would do. Regulus didn't look back at him, but James was sure that he could feel him moving, feel him following.

Regulus took in the house with a disinterested air. Only when they passed the master bedroom did he tense. James mirrored the feeling, his muscles locking up just as Regulus's had. Regulus stared unblinking at their bed, it had been made like someone was trying to sell the house. They never made their bed, although it was mostly Lily sleeping in it for those last few months.

Regulus cleared his throat roughly, turning away from the room carefully and heading straight into the half-destroyed nursery. James wished he could see his face, but Regulus was careful to keep his back toward him. He gave himself a moment before following Regulus this time, one last glance at the place he and Lily had slept. It wasn't a space that belonged to him anymore. He didn't want it any longer, not even abstractly.

“It’s horrible, isn’t it?” James asked when he followed Regulus into the nursery. Regulus was staring at Harry’s crib with his arms crossed tightly over his chest like he was holding himself together. He didn’t respond for a long time and James couldn’t find a single word to speak. There wasn’t much to say. With all of the complicated feelings around Lily, James’s marriage, and the difficult relationship between him and Regulus, one thing was glaringly clear.

Harry had almost died here. He’d almost been murdered in cold blood. He had barely made it out, only to be shoved into unloving hands for so many years.

The nursery was nothing but cold dread and both of them could feel it.

All at once, Regulus seemed to collapse in on himself. Though he remained standing, he bent forward like someone had punched him in the stomach, his shoulders shaking. James lunged for him without thinking, the same grief that wracked Regulus’s body was living in James’s veins.

Nothing between them mattered more than his need to comfort Regulus at that moment.

Despite that assuredness, he was still relieved when Regulus let him, when he came easily into James’s arms, throwing his arms over his shoulders and digging his nails softly into his skin, sobbing like he’d never sobbed before.

Their hearts beat as one, chest to chest, as they mourned the safe, loving childhood Harry deserved.

“How could someone do this to him?” Regulus asked, the words very audible through the sobs tearing out of him. James squeezed him hard enough to bruise. “He’s good.”

“Yeah,” James said automatically.

“He’s so good. He’s—Sometimes—I think he’s the only good thing I’ve ever come in contact with.”

James wasn’t sure he understood what Regulus was trying to say, but he nodded all the same. He understood the sting, the pain, the sorrow. He understood loving Harry. He understood that better than anyone.

The sobs lasted for a few minutes, Regulus unable to speak. His body felt so thin as it shook against James. He felt so breakable. When Regulus did finally talk, his voice garbled and wet. “He nearly died here,” Regulus cried.

“Yeah, he did.” James wished he could pull Regulus closer, even though they were already pressed against each other. He thought that if they could only be that much closer, maybe the anguish over what happened to his son would hurt a little less.

“I have to kill him,” Regulus whispered, his voice transforming in an instant, from desperately sad to rage filled. “I’m going to kill him for what he did.”

“I—” James didn’t get a chance to respond. Only barely audible from their place on the second story, there was the soft popping sound of someone apparating to the front of the house. “Just like last time.”

Regulus shoved him away, not roughly, just enough to get his bearings, to pull his wand, the prepare for a fight. James moved toward the door and Regulus reached out to stop him, his eyes wide.

“No use in hiding,” James argued. “If magic tipped them off, then they already know we’re here.” Regulus’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, his face still red and blotchy from crying. James wanted to kiss him. He always wanted to kiss him. Now wasn’t the time.

James left the nursery quickly and started heading down the stairs. Right to the front door. Right where he’d met Voldemort a lifetime before. He was ready now. He wouldn’t be taken down so easily. He was preparing to cast first and ask questions later when he opened the door but froze the moment he saw who it was.

He looked so much older than the last time James had seen him, but he would recognize those blue eyes anywhere. They’d grown up together, they’d been boys together, they’d shared secrets and snacks and bits and pieces of their souls. He used to be one of the most important people in James’s life.

And here he stood, older and more disheveled, more fearful. Darker.

“Peter,” James breathed. He lowered his wand, not consciousness and not by a lot, but just slightly, just enough to indicate he wasn’t going to cast a spell yet. He needed to *know*, he had so many questions, he couldn’t think.

Peter’s mouth opened in shock when his eyes landed on James’s face.

“*Avada Kedavra.*” The green light came sliding past James’s head so quickly that he barely caught a glimpse of it. It hit Peter square in the chest, that shocked expression the last one to grace his features as his eyes lost their light.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

the hanged man.

The words left his mouth before he consciously chose to say them.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” he shouted, pointing his wand just barely over James’s shoulder. He was lucky he had good aim. Otherwise, it could have been bad.

Peter Pettigrew was dead instantly.

Regulus had let him get away once before, and the rat cut Harry open and revived Tom Riddle. Regulus was not going to allow that to happen again. He didn’t even like the fact that he had laid eyes on James before dying. That was wholly unacceptable. The man who betrayed him did not deserve to look at James, not even for a second.

The dark magic sparked along his fingertips. It had erupted from him so easily, like he was born to cast such a curse. Darkly, he thought his parents would have been proud of the ease with which he cast the curse. Satisfaction and horror married in his chest. He was a monster, a bad man, but killing Peter was something good. That couldn’t be denied.

He was certain of it until James turned to look at him, his eyes filled with shock and judgment.

“Why did you do that?” James breathed.

“What?” Regulus replied, closing in on himself as if every structure in his body had collapsed.

“Why did you kill him?”

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked harshly. James’s judgment stung him like it was trying to burn a hole straight through his body.

“I was going to—I needed to—” James babbled. Regulus understood what he was trying to say. James wanted to have a *heart-to-heart*. How *quaint*.

Regulus gritted his teeth in anger. “He needed to die,” he snarled. “He’s responsible for everything. He betrayed you, he led Tom right to Harry’s crib, and he let *my brother* rot in Azkaban for years. He cut Harry open and used his blood to revive Voldemort!”

The sound of apparition sounded from down the street, and both of them froze.

“We need to go,” James said. They dropped their fight, reaching for each other and spinning away to the safety of an unknown forest.

They arrived near an icy river surrounded by tall, very old trees. Regulus wasn’t sure where they were. James had been the one to lead them there, but Regulus didn’t get a chance to ask,

because before he could speak, James was ripping his hand away and stomping in a circle like a bull getting ready to charge.

Regulus watched him uneasily, but the fire from earlier was still burning in his chest.

“I won’t apologize for killing him,” Regulus said darkly. James spun to look at him, his eyes wild. Regulus didn’t think he’d ever seen him like that.

“He was my friend,” James said sharply. Regulus took two large steps toward him.

“I don’t care,” he snapped. James flinched, but the wild look in his eye didn’t recede. “I will kill *anyone* that tries to hurt you. Do you understand that? If someone tries to kill someone I love, I will end them. They don’t deserve to breathe.”

James’s eyes widened, and for a moment, Regulus didn’t understand why. “Love?” James breathed.

Regulus’s brain started making a loud buzzing sound, the world spinning too quickly around him. He took a stumbling step backward.

“I didn’t mean that,” Regulus mumbled.

James’s face dropped, and Regulus realized his mistake. He meant that he didn’t mean to say it. He should have clarified, but James didn’t give him a chance.

“You always do this!” James shouted. Regulus jumped slightly. “You drag me closer, and then the moment I’m close enough to touch you, you push me away! It’s like you enjoy watching me suffer.”

Regulus’s mouth dropped open. James never shouted at him, not like this. Regulus stumbled back another step. “James.”

“Don’t,” James said, charging forward. “Don’t ‘James’ me. I have been waiting for you to do or say anything for *months*, and the moment you finally let something slip, you just want to snatch it out from under me.”

“I wasn’t trying to—”

“Don’t lie,” James said, then, in an action that was totally unlike him, shoved Regulus hard in the chest, hard enough that he fell backward against a tree.

Regulus never expected James to shove him into a tree, but he was *not surprised* that he didn’t mind.

His heart was pounding, his skin alive like electricity was running through his veins. James’s eyes were blown wide from adrenaline. Regulus felt like he was staring down a rabid deer.

“James,” Regulus whispered.

James ground his teeth together and then made his demand. “I want to be together.”

“James,” Regulus repeated more directly cause what else was there to say?

“You act like we’re playing chicken.” Regulus didn’t know what that meant. “You just stare me down and wait for me to make a move, but I’m sick of it.”

“What are you saying?” Regulus whispered.

“Tell me right now what you want from me,” James demanded.

“Or what?”

“Or I’m going home.”

Regulus gasped quietly, anger bubbling in his chest. “If you don’t want to be here anymore, Potter, then by all means, be my guest. Leave.” He threw his hand out to the side like he was inviting him to step aside, to abandon him in the forest.

James laughed, it wasn’t a nice sound, but it made Regulus shiver pleasantly.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Just run away just like you do.”

“I don’t run away,” Regulus muttered.

“All you do is run. You’ve been running from me since the day we met, and I’ve chased after you because I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“You’ve chased after me. Are you kidding me?” Regulus’s words practically barreled over James’s like they were arguing on top of each other.

“You know I have,” James said unyieldingly.

“Were you chasing me when you married another woman?” Regulus shouted, the words exploding out of him. “Were you chasing me when you made a *kid* with someone else?”

“There it is,” James said darkly. “That’s what’s been keeping you away from me.”

“Can you blame me?” Regulus asked cruelly. “You were the love of my life, and you abandoned me. You replaced me like I was *nothing*. How can you expect me to welcome you back with open arms?”

“That was almost two decades ago,” James argued.

“Does that matter? You’re telling me that if Lily was here, you’d still choose me?”

“Yes!” James shouted. “We were going to get divorced.”

Regulus bristled and tried a different approach. “And if I disappoint you again, you’re not just going to leave me like you did last time?”

“I was a kid!” James shouted. “I was hurt and scared. You cannot spend the rest of your life holding this against me.”

“You don’t get to decide what I hold against you.”

James growled. “You’re being ridiculous!” James yelled so loudly that a flock of birds took flight from their perches high up in the trees. “It’s like you can’t let yourself be happy because you’re too scared of what will happen.”

“Fuck you!” Regulus replied. “I have a right to be scared after last time.”

“Are my years of devotion not enough for you? You’re acting like a bloody coward.”

Regulus’s anger sparked like a potion boiling over onto an open flame. He stepped up to James, craning his neck so he could get a good look at his face as James stared back defiantly. Everything inside of Regulus burned. He grabbed James by the lapels of his jacket and kissed him hard on the mouth.

“I’m not a coward,” he muttered angrily against James’s lips.

James didn’t reply. He didn’t exactly kiss back, either. It felt more like they were continuing their fight wordlessly. They both seemed to wrestle subtly for control, but James was physically stronger than Regulus, so when he pushed Regulus backward against the tree, Regulus had no choice but to let him. His back collided against the ice-cold bark with a thunk, their lips never disconnecting.

He’d just felt James’s leg push between his own when the sound of apparition interrupted them *again*.

Regulus’s eyes shot open—he didn’t even remember closing them—just in time to see a spell flying toward them. He used his grip on James’s jacket to pull him roughly to the ground, the curse just barely missing them as it shattered against the tree trunk. Regulus threw himself over James, who’d fallen onto his back and still looked too dazed to respond. He rolled once, then pushed himself up onto his feet, preparing for a fight.

There were four men around them, all of them unfamiliar to Regulus. They looked young, maybe only a few years out of Hogwarts. One of them still had baby fat stuck to his cheeks. Each of them was dressed in black clothing that looked like it had seen better days.

He didn’t know who the men were or what they wanted, but he could guess that they must be Death Eaters or, at least, working for the Death Eaters if they’d shown up right after Peter Pettigrew. Whoever they were, they weren’t there to make friends.

Regulus was surrounded by the four of them, packed in on all sides, and he could feel James behind him, scurrying to stand, but he didn’t know who to attack first. He wanted to make a move first, but he’d waited too long. A bad habit of his.

“*Incarcerous*,” one of them hissed, the spell flying toward James. Regulus tried to intercept it with a *protego*, but he couldn’t step back in time. To his relief, James rolled to the side just in time.

“Go,” James called just as he landed back on his feet. Regulus understood immediately, turning in the opposite direction from where James was facing and taking off into the woods, the frozen ground shifting beneath his feet. He nearly slipped on a piece of ice as he ran, but he managed to stay standing.

He could hear the sound of feet behind him, and he hoped that they had split their group evenly, he hoped it was only two of them.

“*Incarcerous!*” the same one from earlier yelled again. Regulus had just enough time to wonder if it was the only spell the man knew before he had to duck out of the way, throwing up a shield just for good measure.

He dodged through several thick lines of trees and crossed into a small clearing. He turned with a spell already on the tip of his tongue, shooting out a stunning jinx just as the man with the baby fat entered the clearing. He almost felt bad for throwing a hex at him, the kid didn't even have time to react before he flew back onto his arse.

The other man was older, maybe in his mid-twenties, but he was a sloppy dueler. If he'd been with a large group or had been fighting against children, he might have been a formidable enemy, but Regulus was ruthless, and before long, the man was hanging unconscious by his ankle, blood trickling out of his nose.

Regulus scoffed. He'd expected better. He almost felt over-prepared. It should have been a good thing, but he was still keyed up from everything that had happened that day, so all he could feel was the agitation running under his skin.

He made quick work of tying the men together, ensuring that they were both out cold and that he had their wands safely in his pocket before he went to find James. He wasn't worried that James would be hurt. James was a skilled dueler, but that didn't mean that Regulus felt comfortable leaving him out there alone.

Regulus found James running through the forest toward him, a worried look behind his glasses.

“Are you okay?” they both asked at the same time. Both of them paused.

“I'm fine,” Regulus said quickly. “Where are the ones who were chasing you?” James pointed behind him. Regulus nodded. “Bring them over here.”

“What are you going to do to them?” James asked.

Regulus didn't bother answering him. He just turned and headed back to where he'd left the men. He hadn't yet decided what he was going to do to them, but he had to do something. He knelt in front of them when he made it back to their unconscious bodies, giving them both curious looks, and then he pushed up their sleeves to get a look at their forearms.

They were both unmarked, not that Regulus was surprised. He didn't think men this incompetent were allowed to become Death Eaters. Tom Riddle needed followers, but surely he wasn't *that* desperate.

“Are they alive?” James asked. Regulus turned to see the other two men floating behind James as he approached. He looked worried again, but he was aiming the look at the bound men. It annoyed Regulus. They had just tried to hurt both of them; they’d tracked them through apparition and tried to take them down, and James was worried about *them*.

“I just knocked them out,” Regulus said dryly. “I need to ask them some questions.”

“What questions?” James asked. Regulus ignored him, stepping back to watch as James placed the other two men with the first two so the four of them were lying in a pile. He pointed his wand at the oldest-looking one, the one he’d trapped with *levicorpus*.

“*Rennervate*,” Regulus said. The man gasped as he woke and immediately started throwing his body around, trying to get out of the binds. “Don’t bother,” Regulus said. The man froze like a trapped animal. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Regulus Black,” the man said. Regulus’s eyebrows lifted curiously at the sound of his own name. He couldn’t tell if it was disgust or fear he was hearing in his voice, but he was sure it was one of the two.

“You know me?” Regulus asked, quirking his head to the side. The man looked him in the eyes for only a moment before glancing away. He folded his lips between his teeth like he was afraid he’d already said too much.

“How does he know you?” James asked quietly. Regulus shrugged, staring down the man and waiting for him to say anything. When he didn’t speak—although what else was Regulus truly expecting—Regulus’s anger spiked. He glanced at James to find that he was already watching him with that stupid, worried look.

Some small voice of logic told him not to do anything rash, but a much louder voice spoke over it, telling him that James had already seen the worst of him today. What was the problem in giving in again?

“*Imperio*,” he cast without a second thought. James gasped, but the man’s eyes glazed over as Regulus felt his already weak brain submit to his will. “Tell me how you know who I am.”

“Regulus,” James whispered warningly.

“You didn’t return to Hogwarts with the other students. You’re on our list. Your father hasn’t been seen publicly since he was freed. We were told to bring you in.”

My father, Regulus thought idly. *He doesn't know who I actually am.* “Interesting,” he whispered. “Tell me why you were in Godric’s Hollow.”

“We came because you said a taboo.”

“A taboo?” James asked. Regulus’s eyebrows furrowed. He’d heard of such a thing a long time ago, but he wasn’t sure he understood what it was.

“Explain what a taboo is,” Regulus instructed.

“If anyone says a certain word tracked by the Ministry, then we can apparate directly to their location.”

“What word?” Regulus asked. It wasn’t a direct command, but the man answered him anyway.

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me what you would have done with us had you won.”

James made a small sound that Regulus didn’t understand. He refused to look over at him again, though.

“We’ve been instructed to bring all criminals back to the Ministry.”

“Criminals?” James asked, sounding aghast. The man nodded.

“How many of you are there?”

“Around thirty right now, five teams worth, but the number is always changing.”

“Do you work for the Death Eaters?”

“No,” the man said, but Regulus could feel resistance in his mind. It didn’t seem to come directly from him, but Regulus was sure that he’d been told something that he’d since forgotten, likely by magic.

Regulus stared at him for a long moment. They were tracking the students who didn’t return to school, Regulus had assumed that from the beginning, but it was different knowing it for sure. Who else hadn’t arrived? And what word or phrase did the Ministry put a taboo on?

“Now what?” James asked softly. Something dark sparked in Regulus’s chest, but before he could say or do anything, James continued. “You cannot kill them.”

“Why not?” Regulus asked. James grabbed him roughly by the arm and turned him so they were face to face.

“You have to stop using Unforgivables.”

“Why? Are you going to report me?” Regulus asked snidely.

“Because they’re addictive,” James said fiercely. “They want you to use them, that’s why they’re so illegal. The more you use them, the easier they become to use.”

“How do you know this?” Regulus asked dismissively.

“My mother,” James said sharply. Regulus narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“I don’t have to use Unforgivables to commit murder. I did fine all on my own when I killed Umbridge.”

James gritted his teeth so hard that Regulus worried he might crack them. He looked angry, but Regulus couldn't tell if it was actually directed at him. He'd had a harder time reading James in the previous few months. It wasn't getting any easier.

"We'll oblivate them, and we'll leave. No unnecessary murder." James didn't wait for him to reply, he simply turned away and started the process of removing the men's memories of them. Something in Regulus warmed, watching James take control of the situation. He did his best to ignore it.

Once they were done, James grabbed him by the hand, lacing their fingers together needlessly, and apparated away. They landed in another frosty forest. Regulus wondered how James knew about all of these places, how he knew to find them, but he suddenly felt bone tired, exhausted from everything they'd encountered that day and the lack of good sleep he'd been getting.

They set the tent up in silence, and then James made them a simple dinner of beans and buttered toast. Regulus could barely taste it, he couldn't even tell if he was hungry, he just ate it because James had made it for him.

When they were done eating, James leaned back in his chair and stared at the opening of the tent while Regulus got up to clean the dishes. His thoughts had been racing earlier in the day, but now they'd reduced to a low buzz like he no longer had the energy to complete a thought. He was halfway through cleaning the dishes before he realized that he had been doing it by hand, the muggle way.

He'd never done that before. He paused for a moment, confused by his own actions, but then James came up next to him and silently began drying the dishes and putting them away.

When they were both finished with their tasks, James wiped his hands off with a dish towel and then turned to lean back against the cold stove. He was staring down at his nails, his eyes glinting like he was deep in thought. Regulus watched him for a moment, waiting for him to speak.

James sighed like he'd forgotten to breathe. "Was I really the love of your life?" he asked softly.

Regulus laughed humorlessly, his exhaustion removing any filter he'd previously had. "Of course. You had to know that I loved you."

James chewed on his lower lip, then looked up at Regulus through his lashes.

"Loved, past tense?"

Regulus swallowed harshly. He recognized an out when he saw one. He surprised himself by not wanting it this time.

"Love," he replied. "Present tense."

James must have expected a rejection. He looked more shocked than he'd ever looked, his head snapping up as his mouth dropped open. Regulus stared back at him unblinking, waiting with bated breath for James to react.

James blinked twice, then his eyes flickered down to Regulus's lips. A second later, they were kissing.

Not like before, not like they were arguing, but like they were collaborating, like they were working together to make something beautiful.

Regulus made a small sound, and James reacted like he'd moaned, pushing up against him so that their chests pressed together. One arm circled around his lower back, and the other hand came up to cup Regulus's face gently. His fingers were soft against his skin, gentle and firm at the same time. Just like the rest of James. Just like he had always been.

Regulus grabbed onto his shoulders, trying to pull him closer. He wanted more of him, his earlier protestations forgotten, fading away just as the dark magic left his system.

James replaced it all, filled up the space the dark magic had left behind, his lips and tongue reminding Regulus what it was like to be seen and wanted, to be held and cared for.

Why had it taken Regulus so long to give in to this? What had been stopping him before? All his past reasoning dissolved into nothing.

All he could think and feel and want was James.

James.

James.

James.

the hanged man part II.

Chapter Notes

listen... it's 5k words of smut. it's all smut. that's it. if you're not a smut fan, then i will see you in november.

The tent they were living in wasn't very well-ventilated. It had pockets of cold air that drifted in from the outside world and small blasts of warm air from the furnace they almost always had running nowadays. Most of the time, Regulus spent his days bundled in warm clothes, thick socks, and extra sweaters, but the moment James's hands were on him, he was overheating. He was so warm that sweat was already starting to decorate his forehead, making him feel claustrophobic in his own clothes.

He put his hands on James's chest and lightly pushed him away, just enough to catch sight of James's mouth hanging open, his eyes dazed behind his fogged and smudged glasses.

"What?" he said dazedly. Regulus didn't answer him. He ripped his sweater off over his head and tossed it onto the ground, then jumped forward like he was in bear form, about to eat a man alive. James caught him easily, lifting him off the ground. Regulus wrapped his legs around James's waist, attaching himself to the man.

It hadn't been that long since they slept together, only a few months, but this time felt different. His chest felt like it had been clawed open, like he'd been gored on one of Prongs' antlers, left to be devoured by the forest. If James were to drop him now, he would be in free fall, and that was the scariest bit of all, that was the thing that made him feel so daunted.

James had always had the ability to hurt him, that was undeniable, but the longer they kissed, the more he pressed his body against James's, the more he realized how much danger he was in. James could decide he didn't want him, he could switch on a dime and leave Regulus haunted and broken.

That was terrifying.

Regulus was sure that fear would have controlled him any other time, it would have dictated his choices and all of his movements, but now all he could feel was the way James was using his strength to walk him over to the small bunk bed, and that was enough of a distraction to keep him occupied.

James was taller than he had been as a teenager, wider, broader, more masculine, and Regulus hadn't even realized what he'd been missing, but he could feel it now underneath his nails. Even through the thick hoodie James was wearing, Regulus could make out the curves of his arms and his shoulders.

James dropped him unceremoniously onto the bed, Regulus bouncing twice on his back before settling onto the mattress, James towering above him, a hungry look in his eyes that made a shiver crawl up Regulus's spine. His legs canted open slightly, and he watched as James's eyes tracked the movement, a groan already building in his chest.

"I need—" Regulus started to say. He didn't know how to finish the thought; he didn't know what to say, so he opted for action instead. He pulled off his shirt with a desperation he should have been embarrassed about, but it was impossible to feel embarrassed when James was looking at him like *that*.

Regulus leaned back once he was shirtless and waited for James to move, to come down to his level, to kiss him again, but James didn't move. He was standing with his legs spread just a bit, one hand resting on the top bunk so a small sliver of skin was visible where his shirt and jacket were lifting. His trousers were hung low on his hips—he'd stopped wearing belts two weeks into their time in the tent, and every pair of trousers he'd worn had hung just low enough to be tempting—and Regulus desperately wanted to yank them all the way down.

He was seconds away from reaching out to do just that when James finally spoke.

"Take the rest of your clothes off," he said, his voice deep in his chest, rumbling up like an earthquake. He knew he wasn't a teenager anymore, he *knew* that, but it was different with James over him, with his voice deep and ravenous. He was a *man*, and Regulus had never wanted anyone more.

"Okay," Regulus replied breathlessly, his hands trembling slightly as he unbuttoned his trousers. He wasn't nervous, not with James, but adrenaline was making him shaky. His thoughts were racing—loud and shouting in his ears.

He pulled his trousers and pants off in one go, kicking his feet to shed the bits of clothing, sending them flying to the floor. He pulled off his socks last, and when he was stark naked, he leaned back again, propping himself up on his elbows.

James made another low noise, shifting enough to place his other hand on the top bunk, resting both of his arms above his head. Regulus swallowed heavily, intrigued by the stretch of James's body. He hadn't allowed himself to *really* look at it, even when they were together so many years ago. He was a nervous teenager, and though he wanted James just like any other teenage boy in love would, he never really let himself indulge.

He let himself indulge now. He let his eyes drag over his large hands, his thin wrists crossed over each other, his arms, his shoulders, his torso, his *hips*. Every part of him he could see.

Regulus bit down hard on his lower lip and placed a hand against his chest. James's eyes were glued to it as Regulus trailed that hand down his chest to his cock, already hard and straining between his spread legs. He opened them further as he squeezed himself. It was a relief to finally touch himself, but at the same time, it just made him want James to touch him more.

Something was enticing about the way he was looking down at his naked body, something alluring about the difference between them: James standing and fully clothed, Regulus lying

on his back completely nude. It made him feel like he was moments away from being claimed, taken, but it also made him feel powerful, like all he had to do was open his legs a bit more, and James wouldn't be able to stop himself.

The thought made him groan softly, his bottom lip aching from where he'd dug his teeth into it.

"Are you going to touch me?" Regulus asked softly, the words escaping like a man's final breath, gentle like the wind but filled with meaning. They'd confessed their feelings to each other not two minutes ago, and yet Regulus already felt like he was asking for James to confirm, to explain what he wanted.

"I want to," James said honestly, his voice still lowered. Regulus wished that he could bottle that sound so he could pull it out and listen to it every time he needed to feel like this. He was a milk-drunk kitten rolling around in the sound of James's words.

"What's stopping you?" Regulus whispered, squeezing himself again as he said it. The head of his cock was turning a dark red color, nearly purple, but he couldn't bring himself to do more than a few light squeezes. He didn't want to rush things, he only wanted to come if James was the one doing it.

Free fall, he reminded himself. If James didn't want him, he would be in free fall, and his desire for him made that only more clear.

"I want to keep you," James said, his head falling forward slightly like he was weighed down by the confession. Regulus wondered if his heart was beating as fast as his own. He wondered if he was just as nervous if he could feel the cliff below them, the free fall. "I don't want to do this unless I get to keep you."

Regulus opened his mouth to respond, but he couldn't think of how to phrase the storm of feelings he had living inside him.

"I've loved you for years. I've wanted you for years. I won't survive if you let me have you again and go away again."

"You can have me," Regulus said quickly. James didn't move, he knew Regulus too well, he knew there was something he was holding back. Regulus almost couldn't say it. "You can have me for as long as I'm here, but—" He took a deep breath. "I don't know how long I'll live. This is a dangerous game we're playing, but I want you too."

James's shoulder twitched. Regulus expected a staunch denial about the dangers they were facing. He expected him to fight Regulus on his morbid thoughts. James was the exact kind of man to demand Regulus didn't die, if only by his willpower alone.

Instead, he took Regulus by surprise, and said, "Do you forgive me?"

Distantly, Regulus wondered if he should let his cock go. This was a serious conversation, after all; he should probably have all his faculties. Instead, he dragged his hand up and down his length, keeping himself hard and wanting. James sucked in a breath as he watched him.

“For what?” Regulus asked.

James blinked distantly for a moment before answering. “For everything.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Regulus said evenly. It was the truth, he realized abruptly. They had hurt each other, but they were kids, they barely knew a thing about the world. And though they were them, they were different than they were now. The versions of Regulus and James that existed in this second life—third for Regulus—weren’t the same kids who existed all those years ago.

He thought about all the pain he’d experienced over losing Sirius, losing James, losing Evan, losing everyone. He’d lost so much in his life, but he didn’t blame any of them anymore. Even the lonely, shadowed feelings of the isolated boy with nowhere to go, nowhere to run, were long put to rest.

He used to hate everyone for leaving him alone—James included—but the only reason he ever felt that way was because he loved them, and for James, it was different, it was more. It was like a piece of himself had been broken off and gifted to James the very first time they met.

He loved him. It was as simple as that.

Forgiveness had come and gone, somewhere between Regulus deciding to betray Tom Riddle and choosing to give everything to protect the last piece of James left. All that was left now was the petty feelings of fear and abandonment.

How could those feelings stand against the love he felt?

Especially when James was so open about his own feelings of desire and need. It wasn’t like Regulus was chasing a pipe dream. James wasn’t untouchable, not anymore. In fact, he was more touchable than he’d ever been.

He pushed himself up so that he was sitting, placing his feet on the ground on opposite sides of James’s spread legs. He glanced up at him, almost coyly. Or it would have been coy if he wasn’t already starting to unbutton James’s trousers with deft fingers. James stared down at him, not bothering to move his arms. It shouldn’t have made Regulus want him more, but there was a nonchalance about his statement that made Regulus want to fall to his knees and beg.

“Regulus,” James said quietly. Regulus didn’t know if he was asking for an answer to his earlier question, if he was trying to stop him, or if he just couldn’t stop himself from tasting Regulus’s name on his tongue. It could have been a mix of the three, but James made no other moves, even as Regulus pulled his trousers and pants down below his hips, his heavy cock bobbing out.

Regulus suddenly felt very inexperienced.

He’d had sex before, in his last body and this one, but he’d never done this. Not ever. He’d wanted to; he’d fantasized about it, but he’d been too intimidated before. He looked back up

at James to find him watching with apt attention, his eyes blown wide. His teeth were clenched together so tightly that his jaw was creating a sharp line. Regulus wanted to lick it.

“You’re forgiven,” Regulus said, the words coming out in a whisper. Like a confession shared between children, like something heavy and unknown, like something with a depth that neither of them could interpret. “I forgive you.”

James’s nostrils flared, his eyes tinged with relief for just a moment before the hunger replaced it, chasing it out of him faster than Regulus would have thought possible. Regulus’s heart raced because he’d said what he needed to say, and now he was faced, quite literally, with James’s hard cock.

He swallowed, solidifying himself with the bravery he usually reserved for more dangerous tasks. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to do this, he was just intimidated.

He was grateful that his hand didn’t shake as he reached out and circled his fingers around the base of James’s cock. It was hot and heavy in his palm and thicker than Regulus would have expected. It had been inside of him at one point, but it was different looking at it up close. James’s cock was thicker and longer than his own. It made his mouth water.

He pulled his hand down the length, listening to James’s breath quicken suddenly, then, before he could stop himself, placed his tongue against the head of his cock. A bit of pre-come was dripping from it and the salty taste made him feel filthy in a way that could only be described as distinctly human.

He closed his lips around James’s head as he swirled his tongue around the spongy flesh. James moaned and Regulus glanced up at him and wondered why he’d kept himself from doing this for so long. James was beautiful from any angle, but he was truly magnificent from this one.

Regulus lowered himself as much as he could on James’s cock, taking several inches of it into his mouth while his hand came up to cup James’s ballsack. It was heavy in his hands, lofty and warm. Regulus felt like he was floating, the noises coming out of James’s mouth making him feel lightheaded. Only James’s hand on the back of his head, his fingers laced into his hair, kept him grounded.

He wanted to look up and watch again, but he was too lost in the feeling of James’s weight on his tongue. When he hollowed his cheeks, James made a noise that was barely human.

“Stop, stop,” he begged. Regulus pulled away immediately, his lips slick with spit, he didn’t notice he’d been drooling a bit. He wiped it off with the back of his hand quickly, hoping James wouldn’t notice.

“What’s wrong?” Regulus asked.

James chuckled, smiling down at him. “Nothing’s wrong, except if you keep doing that I’m going to come.”

“Isn’t that the idea?” Regulus asked, smirking slightly.

“Not yet,” James replied. He bent at the waist and grabbed Regulus’s face with both of his hands, kissing him roughly. Regulus groaned into his mouth, his hands digging into James’s still-clothed shoulders.

“Take these off, please,” Regulus asked. James smiled against his lips.

“So polite,” he said when he pulled away. Regulus felt like his face was on fire, James had never spoken to him like that, not even in jest. It made Regulus crave things he didn’t even know how to vocalize. He pulled back to take off his sweatshirt. Regulus was too momentarily embarrassed to enjoy it.

“Lay back,” James said.

“Okay,” Regulus whispered, more than happy to be told what to do. He stretched out backward on the single bed and watched with bated breath as James knelt on the bed, shaking off his trousers along with his shoes and socks. He grabbed Regulus by the hips and shifted him so that he was fully on the bed, his head against the pillow. Then he placed his hands under Regulus’s thighs and pushed them up toward Regulus’s chest, pulling them apart.

Regulus felt a blush crawl down his neck, he felt exposed. They’d only ever done this under blankets or from an angle where he didn’t have to see James’s searching eyes on him. He didn’t want to look like a coward though, so he aimed for cocky.

“Like what you see?” he asked. It was a bit corny, but James smiled anyway.

“Love it,” he said before dropping down onto his stomach between Regulus’s stretched legs and swallowing him down without so much as a breath. Regulus jolted, his legs shaking. James’s lips were stretched around his cock, and he’d never seen anything so attractive. It probably helped that James’s mouth was hot and wet around him, but still.

“Ah, James,” he gasped. “Too much.” James didn’t stop, if anything, he went harder, sucking him harshly and swallowing around his head. His eyes rolled back in his head, his toes curling where they rested on James’s shoulders. He grabbed the pillow below his head, just to have something to keep him present.

He thought it couldn’t get any better or more torturous, but then two of James’s fingers were pushing inside of him, already slick with lube that he didn’t see James summon. It was a stretch; it had been a few months since they’d done this and Regulus wasn’t nearly prepared for the girth of two of James’s fingers, but he took it anyway, too beyond human speech to complain.

“Please, please,” he begged, unsure of what he was actually begging for. More? Relief? He didn’t know. He felt like he was going to come though, James’s fingers deep inside him and his cock down James’s throat were too much. “James,” he groaned, the name slipping from him like a prayer.

“Yes?” James asked, pulling off of Regulus’s cock just long enough to speak. Regulus glanced down at him with narrowed eyes, his brain having been turned to jelly.

“Please,” was all Regulus could think to respond. James grinned, his lips plump and red, his mouth wet with spit. He was beautiful, strikingly so, Regulus couldn’t believe he’d almost forgotten. There was a reason James’s presence used to make him feel so nervous, so out of his element.

“Think you’re ready?” James asked, nudging his fingers a little farther inside. Regulus’s back arched off the bed, his cock kicking twice. It felt almost cold, having been slathered with the warmth of James’s mouth.

“Yeah,” Regulus breathed. The desire to feel all of James inside of him became so strong that Regulus was nearly barreled over by it. A shiver ran down his spine, his skin breaking out in goosebumps, and without consciously thinking about it, his legs opened wider as if to let James in. “Please,” he said again.

James placed a warm kiss against his hip, and then, with a leisureliness that Regulus found almost frustrating, he lavished kisses up Regulus’s stomach, chest, and neck before finally kissing him on the lips, settling his naked body on top of Regulus’s. His cock nudged against Regulus’s hole, slipping down his crease as James lowered his hips.

“I want you,” James whispered.

“You have me.”

“Not yet,” James said. “Not yet.” Their hips seemed to move in tandem, James cock pushing into him with only a slight adjustment. He felt thick, the stretch nearly too much. Regulus was beyond words to describe it, digging his nails into James’s back and hoping he wouldn’t lose all touch with reality.

He’d squeezed his eyes together when James began to thrust inside, but when he felt their hips connect, he opened them to find James watching him with a reverent expression, his mouth hanging open again. Their gazes connecting unlocked every painful, blissful memory between them, the slow way they descended into love, their fighting, the loss, the grief, the connection, the jealousy, the longing, the need. It all opened before them like a long stretch of train tracks, a circular movement that only they would be able to understand.

It had taken them so long to get to where they were, and before them, Regulus could see the long road they had to walk to get to where they could know peace—true, uninterrupted peace—but somehow none of that mattered, not what lay ahead of them nor what had destroyed them in the past.

He had James now. Maybe just for tonight. They might die tomorrow for all he knew. But it would have to be enough.

He used to believe that there was no point to them if it wasn’t endless and if there was something to tear them from each other. He used to ponder all the ways he might lose James, if only to prepare himself for the inevitable. He might have believed it would make it easier, but he couldn’t be sure now, not with the knowledge that bracing for impact didn’t save him any suffering.

Even knowing that, he could feel the urge to brace for the loss building inside him, even as James stared down at him with want, even with James inside of him, he worried about the pain he would feel when he no longer had him.

Instead of succumbing to it, he released his tight grasp on the pain and let himself feel something far more terrifying, his love for James. It scared him more than he could say, but just as he had let himself be opened, let himself feel pleasure, let himself come in James's enthusiastic hands, he let love take him.

As if reading his mind, James whispered, "I love you."

Regulus felt tears pricking at the corners of his eyes, his nose burning with the desire to let loose years' worth of sobs. He swallowed it all and said, "Prove it."

James huffed a laugh, just a small one, but his eyes lit with a desire to do his best—classic James—and he began to move.

The thing was that James was no longer a teenager. And yes, Regulus already knew that, he'd realized it just a few moments ago and they'd slept together once before only a few months prior, but he'd been lost in adrenaline then, he didn't really have the ability to appreciate the changes in James since the last time they'd done this.

James was a bit broader now, his shoulders and chest growing into the shape of a man. He had hair growing in places that were sparse before: his jaw, his chest, and down his stomach. Regulus placed a hand against the hair growing out of his broad chest and was surprised by how much he liked it. He'd never understood the importance of body hair beyond the general posturing of teenage boys going through puberty. He understood it now. It made him want to clench his fingers into a fist and bring a sting to every piece of James that had the gall to be so well decorated.

Probably the most important change to James now that he was a grown man, was his strength. He'd been strong before, well-muscled and athletic from Quidditch training, but there was something deeper now, a strength that couldn't be shaken. Regulus could feel it in every snap of James's hips as he continued to speed up until the bed frame was shaking, skin slapping skin the only noise he could hear.

"Oh, I'm—" Regulus started to say, so distracted by all the little details of James he hadn't let himself appreciate before that he was caught off guard by the orgasm building inside him. Before he could say another word, he was coming untouched, clenching down hard on James cock and pulling him right over the edge with him.

Their mouths connected as they both tumbled down the cliff together. It was filthy, their tongues dancing together, and it seemed to prolong Regulus's orgasm until he was nearly delirious. When they finally broke apart, he was gasping for breath. He tracked the sweat beading at James's hair line, dripping into the scruff building around his jaw, and wondered what he would look like with a beard.

"Do you believe me now?" Regulus asked softly.

“About what?” James asked, sounding dazed.

“That you have me. That I’m yours.” Without meaning to, he squeezed down hard on James’s softening cock. James moaned, low in his throat, and dropped his head down onto Regulus’s collarbone. Regulus chuckled, running his fingers lightly through James’s unruly, sweaty curls. “Well?”

“I think so,” James said, his voice muffled. Regulus yanked his hair to get him to lift his head so he could see his face.

“What?” Regulus demanded.

James’s smile was gentle. “You might have to remind me.”

Regulus smirked, rolling his eyes. “Already trying to get a leg over?”

James pressed his hips closer, his cock growing a bit harder where it was buried inside Regulus, forcing a groan from Regulus’s lips. “Yeah, I’m desperate for you,” James said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“I know you are,” Regulus replied with a sharp grin.

James didn’t even pull out before he was hard again. Regulus wasn’t aware he could manage such a task. He wasn’t complaining.

They woke laced together. There wasn’t much room in the small bed, so they couldn’t have pulled apart if they wanted to. Not without tumbling out of the bed. Regulus, for the first time in his life, realized that waking up in someone’s arms could actually make him feel rested. The smell of James’s skin tickled his nose, and he breathed it in deeply, trying to memorize the scent of him.

James was still snoring softly, his chest moving up and down below Regulus’s cheek. It was strangely calming, the feel of him, the sound of his heartbeat, his arm tucked around Regulus’s shoulder, cradling him close.

He would have stayed in bed all day, or at least until James woke up, but after a bit, his bladder became very insistent on him getting up. He shimmied out of James’s grasp, crawling over him carefully and hissing softly when his bare feet touched the cold ground of the tent. The moment he was out of bed, James grunted and then turned over onto his stomach as if chasing the warmth that Regulus had left behind.

Regulus gave himself a crisp thirty seconds to admire James’s backside before tiptoeing to the bathroom. When he was back, he started making coffee, something he’d grown addicted to while traveling with James, and then downed a full glass of water, his mouth dry as if the activities the night before had dehydrated him.

“I cannot believe Barty got to see you like this,” James mumbled. Regulus glanced over at him in surprise, shocked that he’d woken and also that that was the first thing to come out of

his mouth. Regulus rolled his eyes slowly, making sure James could see every turn.

“Don’t tell me you’re still jealous of him. It was a few rough shags after some terrible nights, he didn’t exactly get the whole ‘morning after’ package,” Regulus said, setting the empty glass down next to the sink.

James frowned and then harrumphed in disappointment. He turned his head away like a puppy throwing a tantrum. “Still,” he said.

Regulus shook his head, unreasonably charmed by James and his sensitivity to Regulus’s sexual past. The possessiveness should not have made him hungry for more, but he was a flawed man. He prowled silently to the bed, bent at the waist, and before he could stop himself, bit down hard on James’s left arsecheek.

James yelped. “Ouch,” he said, looking back at Regulus. It was an unusual setup for them, James with his back turned, Regulus with easy access to the place between James's legs.

“You know,” Regulus said, lechery sinking into his bones, “There was a lot Barty and I didn’t do.”

James’s eyebrows furrowed, he looked different without his glasses, softer. “What’s that?”

Regulus didn’t bother to reply; he didn’t bother to question the nervousness that settled in his stomach, either. Instead, he chose to be a bit reckless, sure that James would still want him after the fact. He knelt between James’s legs, pulled his cheeks apart, and lowered his mouth to James’s most private area.

The noise that came out of James’s mouth sounded like a deer being choked to death. It would have been funny under different circumstances, but now it just made Regulus harder than he'd ever been. He couldn’t believe he was doing what he was doing; he was sure any other version of himself would have been far too intimidated to do such a thing, but now he couldn’t be stopped. Not when James’s legs were shaking, and his hole was softening like fresh flower petals around Regulus’s tongue.

When James reached back to grab Regulus by the hair, his shoulder at an odd angle, Regulus added a finger. He wanted to ask if James had ever done this, if anyone had ever stretched him open, but his mouth was too busy to bother. James took the finger easily, the muscles already loosening and relaxing. He took the second one easily as well, but by three he sounded like he was struggling to breathe.

Regulus felt a pang of worry that perhaps James wasn’t actually enjoying himself, but when he pulled away to ask if he was okay, James spoke.

“I want you inside. Please.”

Who was Regulus to deny him? He wasn’t in the business of denying James Potter. Not anymore. He’d retired. He’d laid that to rest. Now he thought he might just be happy to do whatever James wanted him to do, if only to get him to keep making those noises.

He crawled up his body quickly, his movements hurried. He only paused to try and remember the lubrication spell he'd learned, but James beat him to it. Reaching back to grab Regulus's straining cock to lather him up. Regulus had to bite down on his lip to keep a grip on himself, his thighs trembling from just the feel of James's tight fist. He couldn't even imagine what it would feel like to be inside of him.

He didn't have to wonder for long because, after a moment, James let him go, and Regulus was placing the head of his cock at James's hole. He was almost nervous about pushing inside, afraid he would hurt James, but then James pushed back against him, forcing his cockhead to be swallowed by that tight ring of muscles.

It was nearly too much, searing hot and unimaginably tight, but James's mouth was hanging open again, his face marked by rapturous pleasure, and Regulus knew he could hold on, he could keep himself from finishing too soon like an overexcited teenager, if only to watch James come undone.

When he was completely buried inside of James, he leaned down to speak directly into his ear. "Barty and I never did *this*," he said. "I've never done this at all."

James swallowed harshly. "I haven't either," he said, his words barely audible.

"You're still all of my firsts," Regulus said. James groaned loudly.

"Oh, please, fuck me. I'm not going to last."

The act of thrusting in and out of him was awkward at first, but before long, Regulus was snapping his hips just as James had done, every bit of him focused on the way the muscles in James's back were twitching and arching. It was exhilarating to see. At one point, he reached around to grab James's cock in the tight space between James's body and the bed, tugging only a few times before James started to come.

When they were done, Regulus collapsed next to him, placing a soothing hand against his lower back when James hissed as he pulled out.

"Did I hurt you?" Regulus asked breathlessly. He felt more than saw James shake his head.

"I'm okay," James whispered. "I can't believe we just did that." He sounded like a kid on Christmas, shocked and delighted with the gift he'd been given.

Regulus laughed. "Had you ever thought about it?"

"Bottoming?" James asked.

"Yeah," Regulus said.

James hummed thoughtfully. "Not really," he said. "I knew I'd try it if that was what you wanted." He paused. "Erm, is that what you want?"

Regulus laughed again, this time much lower, the bed shaking slightly. "No," he said, "I'm quite happy with what we usually do, but you don't have to sound so disappointed."

James made a noise of annoyance, but he softened it with a gentle kiss against Regulus's lips. "I'm not disappointed. That was amazing," he said earnestly. "I just like seeing you with your feet next to your ears, that's all."

Regulus slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "My feet have never been by my ears," he chastised.

James smirked, a spark of heat ran down Regulus's spine. "Not yet."

the hierophant.

Regulus didn't believe himself to be a very delusional person. Sirius used to call him pessimistic, but Regulus considered himself a realist. He didn't like to get his hopes up, not if there was a chance he would end up disappointed. So he'd never truly allowed himself to imagine what it would be like to be with James beyond sneaking around at Hogwarts. Looking back, if he had let himself fantasize about him and James, he would not have imagined it like this.

He was lying on his back in the bed they'd charged to fit two people, removing the top bunk that was no longer necessary. They didn't want to sleep separately anymore, only skin-to-skin. He watched through slitted eyes as James strutted through the old tent, completely starkers. He liked seeing James walk around naked; he still had long lines of muscle that dripped down his body even years out from playing Quidditch every single day, and Regulus loved the way his eyes would drag down them.

In his most uninterested voice, he said, "You're going to get sick if you keep doing this." It was chilly in the tent. Not as chilly as it was before they'd finally given in, but still cold. It didn't seem to affect James all that much.

"Are you complaining?" James asked with a confidently arched eyebrow, watching Regulus like he knew Regulus was dragging his eyes back down to the piece of him that shifted while he walked. Regulus turned his head away to hide his smile. James had no reason to be as attractive as he was, and now that Regulus had let himself give in, he was finding it very hard to keep his interest at bay.

"No," he mumbled, "not complaining. Just stating."

"What would you prefer I wear?" James asked just as Regulus looked back over at him, his smile only barely hidden behind the straining muscles of his face, his lips still twitching. James placed a hand on his hip like he was daring Regulus to give him some ridiculous costume to wear. Regulus pursed his lips and tilted his head in a parody of thoughtfulness.

"I suppose your Quidditch uniform wasn't terrible," Regulus said offhandedly. James's smile widened.

"I knew you liked my uniform," he said, growing a bit taller under Regulus's attention. He was like a bird preening for his lover.

"Oh, no, I hated it," Regulus said dramatically. He couldn't fight his smile any longer.

"Did you?" James asked with fake offense, placing a hand against his naked chest.

"Yes," Regulus said with an over-exaggerated nod. "I always wanted you to take it off."

"That's very scandalous."

“I once thought about following you into the locker room just to make sure you removed it.”

“Naughty,” James joked.

Regulus’s cheeks hurt from smiling. It was foolish, but he’d never known that was a real thing. He’d heard people talk about their cheeks starting to hurt after laughing with their friends, but he’d always thought it was an embellishment. He didn’t realize it was real, not until James.

“Are you going to make me dinner or what?” Regulus asked when he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

James laughed, loud and boisterous, turned away, and wiggled his hips as he headed back to the stove. He’d started making them food before getting distracted. Regulus’s stomach had been growling for an hour, but he would never complain. Not when he was getting such a show before dinner.

They fell into a simple routine once they finally began sleeping together, not just in a sexual sense. They would wake up stuck together, their skin still dusted with the sweat of sleep and would start their day by exchanging a few softly spoken words in bed. Regulus never realized how safe he could feel waking up in James’s arms each morning, but it was like a little sanctuary. The increasingly dangerous world outside their tent couldn’t touch him when he was chest-to-chest with James.

It gave every morning a sense of peace, which was dreadfully needed because once they were out of bed and breakfast was cooked, eaten, and cleaned up, they were straight to work. They spent several hours every day dueling until they were sweating, panting, and miserable, but it was necessary. Regulus could feel them both growing sharper, and they couldn’t afford to lose any of their edge, not when snatchers could appear at any moment.

In the afternoons, they would scour the news for any updates about potential Death Eater attacks. They were trying to find the Lestrage brothers, which was priority number one at the moment, but they weren’t having much luck. Most of the time, they ended up at a crime scene that had long since grown cold.

“We need to get a radio,” James said one afternoon.

“Why?” Regulus asked, barely paying attention to him as he poked around a house that had been burned to the ground. There had been two people inside, a mother and a child. The muggles were reporting it as a gas leak, but once he knew what to look for, it was easy enough to see through the lies.

“It’ll help us get news faster.”

So they bought a radio, which Regulus was skeptical about at first, but soon grew to love. There were several wizarding stations, but he found the muggle ones were much more interesting. He and James spent hours just listening to muggle music together, switching back to the news channels periodically to make sure they weren’t missing anything important.

On the wizarding channels, they talked about Harry often. He was wanted by the Ministry, and they prattled on about it constantly. It upset Regulus a bit, but he also couldn't help but laugh. They wouldn't find Harry, not unless he did something very stupid, and even if he did, Regulus would kill anyone who tried to hurt him. Tom Riddle included.

In the evenings, they made dinner together, leisurely moving through the cooking process as they talked quietly to each other. It was very domestic, and though the war lingered right outside the tent walls, Regulus found a quiet tranquility in the calm nights. Once they were done with dinner, they were usually exhausted from the day. Often, they would have sex, but not always, sometimes, they would stretch out in bed together and read aloud until they were both struggling to keep their eyes open.

They didn't have an infinite supply of books, so they'd taken to rereading some of the ones they'd already finished. Currently, they were in the middle of Rita Skeeter's troublesome biography of Albus Dumbledore. They'd just gotten to the section about Dumbledore's relationship with the dark wizard Grindelwald.

"Your point about wizard dominance being FOR THE MUGGLES' OWN GOOD — this, I think, is the crucial point," James read, lowering his voice to do a poor imitation of Dumbledore. Regulus snickered tiredly. *"Yes, we have been given power, and yes, that power gives us the right to rule, but it also gives us responsibilities over the ruled. We must stress this point, it will be the foundation stone upon which we build. Where we are opposed, as we surely will be, this must be the basis of all our counterarguments. We seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD!"*

Regulus tried to shush him, but he was laughing too hard.

"And from this it follows that where we meet resistance, we must use only the force that is necessary and no more. (This was your mistake at Durmstrang! But I do not complain, because if you had not been expelled, we would never have met."

"I can't believe he wrote this," Regulus said, shaking his head slightly. He was lying with his head against James's shoulder, so he couldn't move his head very much.

"The greater good," James mumbled. "He talked about that a lot."

"Yeah," Regulus agreed faintly. It was a common talking point throughout his biography.

"He liked control," James said thoughtfully. Regulus lifted his head to look at him.

"What do you mean?"

James set the book down on his lap. "A few months after I joined the Order of the Phoenix, Dumbledore stopped holding group meetings. He did that a few times when we first graduated Hogwarts, he would invite all of us to one place and go over what everyone was doing, but after a while, he started separating us into groups. He gave us all secret missions, ones we weren't supposed to share with each other. I wonder if he just liked having power over us."

“You had a spy,” Regulus said.

“Right, but still. He was so sneaky about it, making us all feel like we were part of something but still holding it all to himself.”

Regulus frowned. “I guess,” he said.

“You don’t think so?” James asked.

“I don’t know,” Regulus admitted. “I wasn’t part of the Order. I barely knew Dumbledore, but I keep thinking about how he pulled away from power. I mean, he obviously decided what he’d written to Grindelwald wasn’t right, he defeated him in the end, so maybe he had a good reason for what he did. Besides, if he was really power hungry, why wouldn’t he have just become Minister for Magic?”

“Rita thinks it’s because he has more control working in Hogwarts, less oversight.”

Regulus rolled his eyes and slumped back on the bed. “Don’t tell me you’re taking talking points from Rita Skeeter now.” James chuckled. “Do you really think that working as the Headmaster of a school gave him more power than being Minister?”

James shrugged. “I have no idea. He did seem pretty powerful. People listen to him; he had a lot of sway.”

“Not enough to convince them Tom Riddle was back,” Regulus said. “No one believed him then.”

“That’s true,” James said. He didn’t say anything for a long moment, but Regulus could tell he was still thinking about it.

“He was a complicated man,” Regulus said. “Clearly, he wasn’t always as perfect as people thought he was.” He gestured to the still-open book. “But I don’t think that makes him evil either. He did a lot of good things. He was controlling, but maybe, I don’t know, maybe I understand why he was like that.” He said it softly as if he didn’t want to admit it. Maybe he didn’t.

“How so?” James asked.

Regulus shifted uncomfortably. “I would do anything to keep Harry safe,” Regulus said simply. “I’ve killed for him. I’m planning to kill again for him. I’ve lied to people, I’ve broken countless laws and school rules, and not once have I wondered if I was doing something I shouldn’t. Keeping Harry and everyone else I care about alive is the greater good for me, and I’ll do anything to achieve it.”

“Yeah,” James said quietly. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“Besides, I think Dumbledore probably suffered a lot because of his power. I mean, he was estranged from his brother his entire life, they brawled at his sister’s funeral, and he had to live with the guilt of giving Grindelwald the idea he used to kill countless people.”

“I can’t imagine Dumbledore fist-fighting someone,” James said, a laugh in his voice. “I know he was young, but I keep picturing him with his long, gray beard, rolling around on the ground trying to hit someone.”

Regulus laughed softly. “I just can’t believe they fought over his sister dying. I wonder what really happened.”

“Aberforth must have thought he was responsible or that his relationship with Grindelwald caused her death.”

“Maybe,” Regulus said. “It just seems so dramatic.”

“It makes sense,” James said. “I mean, imagine if my friendship with Sirius caused *your* death?”

“Didn’t it?” Regulus joked. James tensed up beside him. “No, I didn’t mean that,” he said quickly. “I died because of my own choices and because Tom Riddle is insane.”

James gave a half-hearted laugh.

“And anyway,” Regulus soldiered on, “I think that Dumbledore and Grindelwald had a lot more going on between them than you and Sirius.”

“Oh?” James asked. Regulus could hear the smile in his tone, he doubted anyone could read that letter between Dumbledore and Grindelwald and miss what was happening behind the scenes.

“Unless, of course, there is something you need to tell me?”

James let out a hearty laugh, a real one that shook the bed. “More than a few people used to think we were hiding some secret romance. Even Remus. Did you know that? He used to be so jealous.”

“*Remus* thought you and Sirius were, what, shagging?”

“He thought Sirius had a crush on me.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Regulus said.

“A bit,” James agreed.

They kept reading Dumbledore’s biography late into the night that evening, far past when they usually would be asleep, and over the next couple of days, they kept circling back to their conversation about the man.

“It’s crazy that Dumbledore was gay,” James said one night.

“Why is that crazy?” Regulus asked. His feet were propped up in James’s lap, and James was slowly rubbing his thumb right into his heel. He kept letting out little mewling sounds against his will, though James didn’t seem to mind.

“No one even speculated on that when he was alive. I never would have known.”

“I bet a lot of people could say the same thing about you.”

“What do you mean?” James asked, his fingers pausing. Regulus wiggled his toes to get James to go back to what he was doing, only speaking when James complied.

“Well, you only ever publicly dated a woman, you married that woman, you had a kid with that woman, and then you died. I’m sure most people don’t think you were gay. Or bi, I guess.”

“Huh,” James said, staring down at Regulus’s feet, his eyebrows furrowed. “I’ve never thought about it like that.”

“Does it bother you?”

“That no one knows I was gay?”

“Yeah.”

James frowned thoughtfully, then shook his head. “I guess not, it’s not like it really matters either way.”

“Are you sure?” Regulus asked. “We could falsify evidence of your secret gayness, get Rita to write a tell-all book about it.”

James laughed softly. “That would be something,” he said. “I think the most important people know now. You know, obviously, Sirius and Remus know, Harry knows — I’m assuming, I mean, he’s the one that outed me when I showed up in last night’s clothes.” He shook his head, a secret smile on his lips.

“What about your parents?”

“What about them?”

“Did they know?”

“Writing a tell-all book wouldn’t inform them,” James joked. Regulus rolled his eyes.

“No, you’re right.” They fell into a comfortable silence for a long couple of minutes before James spoke again.

“I think they knew anyway,” he said quietly.

“Really?” Regulus asked.

James nodded. “Sometimes when my dad would talk to me about who I would marry, he would use — I’m not sure how to describe it — overly vague language.”

Regulus laughed. “Was he trying to get you to confess?”

James smiled. “I don’t think so, but I’m sure he wanted me to know I was loved no matter what.”

“What about your mum?”

James’s smile went soft, reminiscent. “She definitely knows.” Regulus’s eyebrows lifted curiously. “I saw her, I don’t remember if I told you that. I saw her during the ritual.”

“What ritual?”

“The one we used to remove the soul fragment from Harry. Sirius did his last test run with me instead of Remus, remember?” Regulus nodded. “My mum was there waiting for us. Sirius said it wasn’t uncommon, apparently he’d seen Lily when it was just him and Remus. They thought she would show up again, but it was my mum. We didn’t get a lot of time, but she knows.”

“She knows about me?” Regulus asked, unnervingly touched.

“Yeah,” James whispered, and when he looked up, there were tears in his eyes. Regulus abandoned his chair instantly, throwing himself into James’s lap, their lips crashing together.

They found a lot of comfort with each other. So many little moments were stolen away just for them.

Another night, they ended up discussing Dumbledore, it started in a very different place, though the result was the same.

“Do you ever feel bad for Dumbledore?” Regulus asked. They were both a little sloshed, they’d stolen wine during their last outing and had ended up downing a bottle and a half during dinner that night.

“Because he died?”

Regulus shook his head. “No, because he had to be the one to defeat Grindelwald. It seemed like they were pretty—” he hiccuped “—into each other. I wouldn’t want to face you on a battlefield.”

“Well, you don’t know that Dumbledore felt about Grindelwald the way you feel about me,” James said, rubbing his chin like he was engaged in a deep, philosophical argument. “It could have just been a fling.”

“You think that was a fling?” Regulus asked incredulously. “He never dated ever again, at least to the public’s knowledge. He never had a long-term partner. And,” he added far too loudly, “he didn’t kill Grindelwald, even though he could have, he just defeated him and locked him up in that prison he created.”

“Good point,” James said, his eyes glittering as his smile stretched wide. “So you’re saying that if I turn out to be evil, you won’t kill me? You’ll just send me to prison?”

“Please,” Regulus said dismissively. “You would never be evil.”

“You don’t know that!” James said loudly, sounding as if he was genuinely offended, as if saying he wouldn’t be evil was some great slight.

“What?” Regulus asked. “You have some secret evil plan you’re storing away?”

“Maybe I do,” James said fiercely.

Regulus rolled his eyes slowly. “Then no, I wouldn’t kill you.”

“What would you do?”

“If you turned out to be evil?” Regulus said, just to be sure he and James both knew what ridiculous topic they were discussing.

“Yes,” James asked seriously.

“Well,” Regulus said slowly, pursing his lips in thought, “I have to admit, I think you would be pretty attractive if you were evil.”

James gasped. “Regulus, no! That’s wrong.”

Regulus let a lecherous grin cross his face. “Would you be wearing a mask? I can already picture it, you with dark, flowing robes—”

He was cut off by James gasping again. This time, he didn’t sound appalled. “Are you getting turned on by this?”

“You tell me,” Regulus said in a low over. They’d been sitting at the table while talking, so Regulus slid to the floor beneath him and crawled under the table to get to where he wanted. James didn’t bring up Dumbledore again that night, but he did periodically bring up the idea of him wearing a mask.

Before they knew it, Christmas day was upon them. Regulus couldn’t believe they’d been gone for that long, but one morning, he woke up to find the charmed Galleon active. He rushed to pick it up, only to discover a simple ‘Merry Christmas’ message etched on the front of it.

“Oh,” Regulus said softly.

“What’s wrong?” James shouted, jumping out of bed so quickly that his knees gave up beneath him, and he collapsed back onto the bed.

“Nothing,” Regulus said quickly. “It’s—well, it’s Christmas.”

the temperance.

“Christmas,” James said thoughtfully. “I didn’t get you anything.”

Regulus laughed. “How rude,” Regulus replied. He sobered quickly. “I can’t believe we’ve been out here for so long. I wish I knew what Harry and the others were up to today.”

“I wish we could go visit them,” James mumbled.

Regulus felt a yawning sadness open up inside him. He missed them all so much. He wondered if Harry was worried about them. He wondered if Sirius was waking up safe and comfortable, if he and Remus were still happy. He wondered what Hermione and Draco were doing, if they missed their parents. He guessed that Narcissa and her husband usually had a huge, over-the-top Christmas celebration. That seemed to be her style. He wondered if Draco was aching for home.

He jumped when James’s hands slid up his back to rub his shoulders.

“You’re tense,” James said quietly. Regulus forced himself to relax, he knew it wouldn’t fool James.

“I just miss them.”

“I know. I do, too. Harry and I have never really had a real Christmas together. At least you have Christmas memories with him.”

Regulus frowned. “I suppose you’re right,” he said. “But I spent most of my time worried about him, I’m not sure how enjoyable they were.”

“When all of this is over, we’ll have a proper Christmas. We’ll all go away as a family, somewhere pretty.”

“Promise?” Regulus whispered. James placed a soft kiss against his cheek, it warmed him.

“Promise.” Without warning, he slapped Regulus hard on the arse. Regulus yelped. He’d been sleeping in nothing but his pants, and he suddenly felt a chill crawling over his skin. “Now, what do you want for breakfast?”

“Cinnamon buns,” Regulus snarked. There was no way James would be able to make cinnamon buns in their tiny tent.

“Coming right up,” James said. Regulus scoffed but left him to the kitchen, heading to the tent’s shower. It wasn’t exactly what he would call a luxury shower, but it was always warm—charmed by magic—and that was probably more than could be asked from a tent shower. He cleaned himself quickly, but by the time he was out, the smell of cinnamon and melted butter was wafting from the kitchen.

“James?” he called.

“Yeah,” James replied in a sing-song voice.

“What did you make?”

“Cinnamon buns,” James replied. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Yes. I mean, I was sort of kidding. How did you manage to make cinnamon buns?”

“Erm, in the oven?” James said. Regulus was still wrapped in a towel when he entered the kitchen, a small pan of ill-formed cinnamon buns was sitting on the counter. “Were you actually kidding?”

“No,” Regulus said, closing his eyes to inhale the comforting scent. “I just didn’t know you knew how to make them.”

“Did you have them at home growing up?”

“Merlin, no,” Regulus said with a dismissive laugh. “We would have never been served something so messy. No, I had them at Hogwarts. First year, Sirius snuck me into the kitchen. I think he felt bad for icing me out those first few months after I was sorted into Slytherin. He was still trying then, and he took me to the kitchens and demanded that the elves make us cinnamon buns. It was the first time I’d ever had something so decadent.”

“That makes me sad,” James whispered.

“Why?” Regulus asked, turning to look at him over his shoulder. James was leaning against the table.

“I don’t like thinking about how neglected you two were. I hate that your parents treated you both like that. It upsets me.”

“Well, Walburga and Orion are dead,” Regulus said, intending to lighten the mood. “You don’t need to be angry about it now.”

“I wish I could kill them again,” James muttered, crossing his arms like a child throwing a tantrum.

“Oh, right, 'cause you’re such a killer,” Regulus joked. They’d already talked about how Regulus was planning to kill the Lestrage brothers, James had wanted to be kept out of it. Regulus didn’t bother him; cold-blooded murder wasn’t for everything. Neither of them brought up Barty.

“And even though they’re dead,” James said, carrying on like Regulus hadn’t even spoken, “you and Sirius still have to live with what they did to you. Sirius still has scars. *You* still have scars.”

“They’re not that bad,” Regulus mumbled. “Not as bad as the scares I earned elsewhere.” He gazed down at the inferi scars that littered his torso. He found them disgusting, most of the

time, he pretended they weren't there. He hated that James had to look at them. Although even they couldn't compare to the dark mark on his left forearm.

"I wish you had had a happy childhood," James grumbled.

Regulus nearly laughed, luckily, he had the good graces not to, but the idea that, of all things, James was pouting about Regulus's shitty childhood. It was touching, however unreasonable, that he cared so much. Regulus pressed himself up against James's torso, comforted that James immediately dropped his arms so that he could pull Regulus closer.

"You can make up for it now," Regulus whispered. James smiled, it was still a little tense, a little dark, but it was softer than the worry that was on his face a moment before.

"I can try," James said.

They ate slowly, whispering across the table like children sharing secrets, and then they went out into the snowy woods that surrounded the tent and did the same thing they'd done on James's birthday. They turned into their animagus forms and barreled through the forest, taking turns chasing each other. It had been a while since Regulus was in his bear form, but he loved the stretch of his muscles as he lumbered across the forest floor. His thoughts narrowed, and the world outside was forgotten until he was panting and exhausted.

They spent the evening in bed, curled up around each other—inside each other—until it was late, and the fire had long since gone out. It wasn't his usual choice for a Christmas day, but he had no reason to complain. He had James, he had the relative safety of their tent, and he had the knowledge that Harry was with people who loved him. That was enough.

They went back to their daily routine after Christmas, and before Regulus knew it, New Year's Day had passed, and 1998 had dawned. *This is the year Tom Riddle dies*, Regulus thought to himself. He didn't share it, but from the set of James's jaw, he thought he probably agreed with him.

They were a week and a half into January before anything changed. He was dreaming about something, he wasn't sure what the details were, after he woke up, the dream left him as so many had before, but he was sure it was about Evan. He hadn't dreamed of Evan in a long time. He woke with a gasp, his heart pounding, but when he quickly scanned the tent, he found it empty and still, James snoring slightly next to him.

He tried to go back to sleep, but his thoughts were racing, and he couldn't find a comfortable position that would lull him back to dreams. After half an hour, he gave up, crawling over James's sleeping form so that he could make himself some tea. He thought it might calm his nerves, but they persisted. He watched James sleep for a while, his chest rising and falling steadily.

When that stopped calming his thoughts, he walked outside of the tent, hoping the cold would shock him into feeling normal. He didn't know why he felt so wrong, his dream hadn't been scary, if anything, it felt like it was peaceful. So why?

Was it Harry? Sirius? Draco? Were they in danger? He had no way of knowing, the charmed Galleon was cold and quiet in his pocket. What if they were dead, and he didn't know? How would he find out?

He was working himself into a true panic when movement caught his eye. He yanked out his wand so quickly that he dropped the mug he was carrying. It shattered when it caught the side of a boulder near his feet, the noise startling the silent forest around him. He barely noticed, his eyes were locked on the blue glowing light filtering in and out of trees.

"Regulus," James hissed, skidding out of the tent. He wasn't dressed, and his hands were empty, his wand no doubt left sitting on the bedside table. He wasn't even wearing his glasses, that was how quickly he ran out to see what was wrong.

"It's a patronus," Regulus said, his voice devoid of emotion, uncomfortably empty. His heart was racing, but his hand was steady.

"What?" James said, spinning to look around rapidly, not that he could see much of anything without his glasses.

"Get dressed," Regulus hissed. "Now."

"Right, right," James mumbled quickly, scurrying back inside. Regulus was cold too, but at least he was wearing more clothes than James, a thick robe wrapped around him and slippers on his feet. When James hurried back outside, he had his wand, thankfully, in his hand. "Did you say it was a patronus?"

Regulus nodded, he could still see the small flashes of light from the thing, but it hadn't come closer, and it had yet to move so that he could see its form.

"I'm going to follow it," Regulus whispered.

"What if it's a trap?" James asked, placing a protective hand on Regulus's forearm.

"It probably is," Regulus said quietly. "I'm going to follow it anyway." What other choice did he have? He had woken up out of a dead sleep, something wanted him to be awake, and there was no reason a patronus would be randomly lingering outside of their tent. That was too impossible.

James ground his teeth together. "I'm right behind you," James said. Regulus wondered, as they stepped away from the safety of the tent and into the cold, if he should have paused to grab real shoes or to put socks on. He couldn't bring himself to turn back.

The patronus wasn't too far from them, but as they moved closer, it seemed to move away. He couldn't tell for sure, he couldn't get close enough to see it, but every line of trees they crossed, led to the same distance from the patronus. It took them a solid couple of minutes before they caught a full glimpse of it. It was James who saw it first.

"Lily," he gasped. It made Regulus's blood run cold because, yes, it was a doe, and for a horrible second, he imagined it really was Lily. That she was back. And he knew James was

his, he'd said they were going to separate anyway, but if Lily was back, would James go to her? Would he take her back? Would Regulus be left out in the cold? Would he be forced to watch them fall in love all over again? "That's Lily's patronus."

James's voice snapped him out of his spiraling. "Not just Lily's," he said.

James didn't react at first, but slowly, his head turned, and his eyes settled on Regulus like a heavy weight.

"Who?" he whispered.

Regulus couldn't look away from the doe lingering before them, she seemed to have noticed them, but she wasn't running away or walking closer. It was like she was waiting for them to finish their conversation. Chills broke over Regulus's skin as the answer to James's question settled on his tongue.

"Severus Snape," he said. James's face twisted in disgust.

"They had the same patronus?" James asked. He couldn't have sounded more incredulous.

"Yes," Regulus said.

James made a noise of revulsion. "He's such a freak," James snarled.

Regulus gave him a disbelieving look. "Really? Your hatred of Snape is rearing its head now?" Regulus asked.

"Oh, I forgot, you two were *friends*," James said snottily. "You know he killed Dumbledore, right?"

"I used to share your patronus," Regulus said, mostly to distract James from a Snape tirade.

"What?" James gasped, his face dropped into an expression of surprise.

"Before you came back to life," Regulus said. "It has more to do with grief and loss than it does with whatever you're thinking. That's why he has the same one as Lily because he was grieving her loss."

"You're defending him," James said darkly.

"Don't," Regulus warned. "We need to see what the doe is doing here."

"You just said it belongs to Snape," James said incredulously.

"Yes, but that doesn't change the fact that it found us and that it clearly wants to show us something. It wasn't us to follow."

"Snape wants us to follow. *It* doesn't want anything," James argued.

“Go back to the tent,” Regulus snapped, annoyed for a reason he couldn’t define. He had no stake in James’s dislike of Snape—he was right, he did kill Dumbledore—but for some reason, remembering the way James treated Snape was causing an uncomfortable sting in his chest. He charged forward before James could reply, he expected an argument or maybe even for James to turn back, just as Regulus had told him to. Instead, he heard the quiet footsteps of James behind him as he followed the doe.

She turned once he was within a handful of yards from her and began tip-toeing through the forest, always staying just out of reach.

“What if a bunch of Death Eaters are waiting for us?” James asked after a while. Regulus didn’t have an answer for him, that could be exactly what happened, and he had no choice but to hope that it didn’t kill them.

When the doe finally stopped, it was in the center of a small lake of water covered in a layer of ice. She seemed to look at them with knowing eyes. He knew it was impossible, patronuses barely had the personality of real animals, they certainly didn’t have the knowledge of a person, but there was something cocky about it, something taunting. His stomach twisted, but he tried not to let it affect him too much.

The doe vanished into a blue, glowing ball that lowered through the ice, settling down to the bottom of the small lake before disappearing completely.

“What?” James whispered. His words sounded loud in the still, silent forest. “That’s it?”

“I don’t know,” Regulus said vaguely, shaking his head faintly. He took a few steps forward, but the doe didn’t reappear.

“What now?”

“I don't know,” Regulus repeated. He was at a loss. What was the point of waking up? What was the point of following the doe so far into the forest? He took one tentative step out onto the ice, it creaked beneath him, but it didn’t break. He took another step.

“What are you doing?” James hissed.

“It sank into the water,” Regulus whispered back, it felt wrong to talk too loud. “I have to see why.”

“What if you fall through?” James asked.

Regulus didn’t have an answer for him, that seemed to be happening to him a lot today. Luckily, the ice held as he slowly crossed it to the center of the tiny lake.

“*Lumos*,” he whispered, then shone the light beneath his feet.

At first, all he could see was the reflection of the light on the ice, but then a glimmer shot through the water like it was aiming right toward him.

“There’s something down there,” Regulus gasped.

“What is it?” James asked, still standing on the shore. Regulus could tell that he wanted to come out onto the ice as well, but both of them knew it might be too much, and they couldn’t risk it.

“I’m not sure,” he said faintly. He stepped away from it, and with a careful cutting charm, he sliced through the ice, creating a small hole.

“Be careful,” James whispered, his voice strained. Regulus nodded and dropped into a crouch so that he could get a better look at the water. Without the reflection of the ice, his *lumos* was able to catch the object at the bottom of the light. The *lumos* light slice back up at him, reflected by the silver of metal.

“It’s the sword,” he said before understanding dawned on him. “It was Snape. Snape’s at Hogwarts, but the sword was supposed to go to me. They didn’t know where it had been, but I bet Snape got to it.”

“Dumbledore left it to you?” James asked.

Regulus nodded. “I thought it was weird.”

“It *is* weird. Why would Snape go to all this trouble to get it to you?”

“I’m not sure,” Regulus said. He’d long since abandoned trying to understand that man, and it wasn’t like he and James could talk it through in any real capacity. “*Accio* sword.” Nothing happened.

“Why at the bottom of a lake?” James mumbled, almost to himself.

Regulus knew the answer the moment the question was asked. “Because only a Gryffindor would be stupid enough to jump into freezing cold water just to get a sword,” Regulus said.

“But you’re a Slytherin,” James said. “He’s expecting *me* to get in the water?”

“You forget,” Regulus said, already shedding the robe he’d wrapped around himself, “I was sorted into Gryffindor, too.”

“I don’t think you should go in there,” James said, suddenly panicked.

“Why not?” Regulus asked. He glanced up at him, James was pacing in quick steps back and forth along the bank like a caged animal who couldn’t figure out a way across.

“You’ll get sick or die of hypothermia.”

Regulus frowned. “Surely you don’t think I’m that delicate,” Regulus said. “I’ll be quick.”

“Regulus, no,” James said sharply. “I’ll do it.”

“It’s fine,” Regulus said, kicking off his slippers and yanking his shirt over his head. He wasn’t interested in getting completely naked for this, but the fewer clothes weighing him

down, the better. He could still remember swimming to the shore of the Black Lake after the third task, he'd kept getting dragged under by the weight of his wet clothes.

"Regulus," James pleaded. Regulus didn't understand his worry. It wasn't like he was going to sit by and demand James submerge himself in freezing water. Besides, the quicker he went in, the quicker he could get out, and he was already shedding the weight of his thoughts, preparing to dunk himself.

"Just don't let me drown," he said, taking one last look at James's worried face before throwing himself through the hole he'd cut. The water was colder than he could have imagined. At first, it felt like a sharp sting all over his body, but immediately, it started to seep into his skin, making his lungs feel tight, and his muscles cramp.

He swam to the bottom of the lake inelegantly, his limbs barely obeying him, and when his fingers closed around the sword's hilt, he worried he might lose them. He couldn't feel the sword, not at all, his fingers were too numb. He pushed off the bottom of the lake, letting the momentum carry him to the top as his limbs slowly stopped responding altogether. He had just enough strength to lift the sword and throw it over the ledge of ice above him just as his head crested the surface, and he was able to fill his lungs with air.

"James," he called. He realized that he should have told him to wait right next to the opening, but he didn't have to worry, James was right there, all warm, strong hands and safety. He yanked Regulus out of the water easily like he was nothing more than a kitten who'd fallen into a bowl of milk. Regulus was grateful because he wasn't sure that he could move on his own.

James wrapped him in his robe and apparated them the short way back to their tent. Regulus couldn't get his legs to move, but he didn't have to, because James picked him up, his arms under his back and behind his knees, and carried him into the tent.

It felt like it took a very long time before he felt warm again, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't panic, not at first. Yes, the cold had sunk into his bones like knives through his skin, but he didn't connect it to anything. Not at first.

Pain was funny like that, sometimes, it hovered in the back of his mind, dancing in the shadows, until it felt safe enough to be seen, safe enough to be felt.

He was wrapped in a blanket, warm clothes replaced his wet ones, as he sat in front of the furnace that James had filled with a roaring fire. He had an empty mug cradled in his fingers, the warm liquid already consumed. James was messing with the sword at the table, just out of sight of where Regulus was facing.

That's when the panic set in, the memories of being dragged below the surface of the water in the cave, the nails in his skin, the helplessness, everything came rushing back like he was being thrown in front of a speeding train.

"James," he cried only seconds before he lost the ability to speak. He dropped the mug, grasping at the shirt around his neck like it was choking him as his breaths stopped coming.

“Regulus?” he heard James say. In a split second, he was there, crouched in front of him, taking him into his arms, cradling him, comforting him, carrying him through the pain. “You’re safe. You’re alive. You’re here with me.”

The words helped settle something in him, but it still took a long time for him to feel anywhere close to normal. James put him to bed at some point, holding him tight as he settled into an uneasy sleep, but days passed before Regulus could close his eyes without feeling death at his door.

the temperance part II.

Chapter Notes

cw: violence, murder, and references to two adults being inappropriate with regulus when he was a child. if you want to skip this chapter because of the contents, i will include a summary of it in the end notes <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus was not able to tell Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestranger apart until his fourteenth birthday. As a child, he saw them only at family functions, and even then, he usually avoided them. They were both tall and very thin, almost sickly looking, and to a little kid, they looked more like ghoulish imitations of wizards than actual men. They reminded him of the monsters that appeared in the storybooks that he and Sirius read as children.

He was afraid of them, it was as simple as that.

They left him alone for the most part, at least before he went to Hogwarts. Most of the people who came to parties at Grimmauld Place were only interested in rubbing shoulders with his parents or grandparents, they were interested in their own political dealings and bank accounts. They didn't have any space to care about children.

Regulus was just an ornament then, the second son locked away in his room until it was time to come downstairs and look presentable. Sirius was terrible at that job, he would fidget and cause scenes, he would get them both in trouble, but Regulus had always been good at disconnecting from his surroundings. He knew if he was just quiet enough, he would eventually be dismissed, and he could return to his room and spend the rest of the evening unsupervised, just like he wanted.

But Sirius never caught on to that idea. Sometimes, he wondered if Sirius had the right idea in rebelling, even before Hogwarts, after all, he was the one who made it out of their family, but then again, it was different when they were children, when they had nowhere to run.

Sirius would cause problems because he was bored, and he didn't like to be told what to do, and both of them would end up locked in the kitchen closet without food or water for half a day. It used to annoy Regulus to no end, but Sirius always found a way to make it up to him.

Besides, it got him away from the boring—and often unsettling—adults who attended their family's parties, and that was worth something.

He thought that when Bellatrix and Rodolphus finally got married, he would be able to tell Rodolphus and his brother apart. He sort of could that day. There was a distinct difference between the groom and the not-groom, but by the time the reception party began, he was mixing them up again.

That was the first time they showed him any attention. He was still too young to attend Hogwarts. Sirius was a year out from starting himself, but he guessed they weren't young enough to stay hidden anymore.

One of the brothers — he wanted to think it was Rabastan at the time, surely newly married to his cousin Rodolphus would not be that weird to him — cornered him when he tried to sneak away to use the bathroom. Most of the full-fledged wizards and witches just used magic to empty their bladders when they were at events, it was something old-timey wizards did, or so he'd been told. Regulus thought that was gross and had resigned to never doing it before he'd even touched a wand.

Regardless, Regulus wasn't allowed to just leave functions, not without asking, but he'd needed to pee for more than an hour, and his father was still deep in conversation about something or other with the Minister, and Regulus couldn't find an appropriate time to ask. Sirius would have been useful, but he'd vanished hours before, disappearing into the crowd of people and no doubt getting up to mischief.

So when his father turned away, leaving Regulus out of sight, he'd rushed away, intending to get back before his father could notice him gone. His plan was interrupted when Regulus was unceremoniously pinned to the wall right next to the top of the stairs. He was only a few feet from the bathroom.

Rabastan or Rodolphus, whichever one it was, had his hand against Regulus's chest and was bending over so he could speak directly to him. Regulus couldn't remember what he'd said, it was too much for a child to understand.

All he knew was that an adult should not be speaking to him that way, and the smell of fire whiskey on his breath was turning Regulus's stomach. When he reached out and grabbed Regulus roughly by the chin, Regulus panicked. His small body wasn't accustomed to fear like that, and he could still remember the feeling of warm pee trickling down the inside of his leg.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" Sirius's voice cut through the moment like a slicing spell flying through the air, and Regulus was able to shake free and print into the bathroom away from Rabastan or Rodolphus.

He'd locked the door, only allowing Sirius in after he was sure the other man had gone. He'd been crying, very sure that he was going to be punished by his parents and, worse, sure that Sirius was going to mock him for wetting himself.

But Sirius had just traded trousers with him, and when they walked back downstairs together, Sirius had stomped right outside to the dilapidated fountain that sat right outside of Lestranger Manor and had thrown himself into the waters, whooping loudly to draw attention to himself.

They didn't talk about what happened, but Regulus was sure to stay as far away from the Lestranger brothers as possible after that.

Things got worse when he became a Death Eater. He could never figure out which of them cornered him outside the bathroom, but it didn't matter, because it turned out they had more in common than just their looks.

Rabastan had a habit of drinking a bit too much and following Regulus around, and Rodolphus would complain loudly to Regulus that his wife, Bellatrix, hated him and that she wouldn't come to their shared bed, no matter how much her father said she had to. It was bad enough listening to it, but hearing Rodolphus try and get into Regulus's bedroom after dinner ended made it so much worse.

Needless to say, Regulus had no qualms about killing the two brothers. He wasn't even sure that the Horcrux was in their vault, even if it had been, there was no way of knowing if it had been moved since then. That didn't even play a factor in Regulus murdering them. By the time he met them in the field, the Horcrux felt completely divorced from the Lestrangle brother's continued lifespan.

His conversation with James about the brothers was limited. Killing them was just a means to an end; it was just to get the Horcrux. He'd expected that to be the end of it, especially when James had made it clear that he wanted no part in the murders. Regulus didn't blame him; it was different planning to kill someone rather than letting his emotions run rampant as he had with Umbridge.

However, he'd underestimated how closely James was paying attention to him. He should have known. James was always more detail-oriented than him.

"What are you not telling me?" James asked one afternoon. They'd just finished their daily dueling practice, and Regulus's heart rate had yet to settle.

"About what?" Regulus asked.

James did something very odd with his shoulders. Regulus thought he was trying to shrug as if to appear nonchalant, but he was too keyed up and anxious to make it look normal. Instead, he jerked around like a fish ripped from the river by the claws of a bear.

"About the Lestranges," James said. His voice was very serious, very solemn. It would have been funny under a different context, but attached to that name, it sent a shiver up Regulus's spine.

"What about them?" Regulus asked. He wasn't being purposefully dense. It just hadn't occurred to him that he needed to tell James about his past with them. Nothing of interest had happened, it was just threats and unsettling behavior. That hardly accounted for front-page news.

James released an angry sigh through his clenched teeth. "I know there is more to the story. Every time you bring them up, you look—I'm not sure—far away, I guess."

"Far away?"

"Yes," James answered impatiently. Regulus didn't really understand the attitude.

“They were just creeps,” Regulus said simply.

“Creeps?” James asked. There was something in his voice now, almost like judgment, but Regulus didn’t think it was aimed at him. He wondered how much James knew without having to be told, he wondered if the far-away look he mentioned gave more away than Regulus could have known.

“Nothing happened,” Regulus said quickly. James’s eyes darkened. “They were not always appropriate with me.”

“What?” James asked sharply.

“Nothing happened,” Regulus repeated. He felt like he was being interrogated, which he didn’t think was fair, but then again, if James had said the same thing about some adult treating him inappropriately when he was a child, Regulus would probably have lost his mind. “Listen, it’s not a big deal. They’ll be dead soon anyway.”

James didn’t respond to him. He looked like he was biting very hard down on his tongue. Regulus waited for him to process what he was saying, but James didn’t pick the conversation back up. When they went to bed that night, James was overly gentle with him, slow to the point of frustration, but Regulus didn’t complain. Whatever James needed to do to work through his feelings, Regulus would allow it.

They still hadn’t talked about it a few weeks later. January was almost over, and Regulus was too cowardly to admit that he was losing hope. They were sticking to their schedule and doing their best, but it didn’t seem like much was changing. It didn’t seem like they were moving forward at all.

He was already starting to have nightmares about their potential failure. He didn’t think that James had noticed—he had a bad habit of sleep-talking, so he was worried his nighttime mumblings would give him away—but it wouldn’t be long before the stress would start to wear on him. He was in the middle of trying not to think about it when the music coming out of the radio abruptly cut off.

Regulus had stopped paying much attention to the muggle news that came through on the radio, but James was still focused on it. Regulus knew he could take a step back when James was the one keeping track.

“There’s been another attack,” James said, knocking Regulus from his rumination.

“Where?”

“Fraiswick,” James said. “They said it’s another gas leak, but this one took out seven houses!”

“No,” Regulus breathed. “Seven?” The idea of seven families reduced to nothing but corpses made him feel sick.

“Let’s go, maybe they left something behind.”

It was late in the evening, nearing midnight, when they apparated to Fraiswick. James's hands were sweaty against his, and it was making him nervous. One of them had to keep their head, but Regulus didn't know if he could be the one to do it. Not tonight. Not with seven families dead.

They'd apparated to a few Death Eater attacks in the past where muggle—and sometimes wizard—police were still milling about. He expected this one to be the same. It had only been a few hours since the attack, surely they would still be there. However, when they dropped into the neighborhood, they found nothing but empty, silent darkness. All the street lights were out like the power had been cut. The houses still standing looked abandoned, and the ruins of the other houses lay untouched before them.

"They probably told everyone to evacuate in case the gas leak wasn't fixed in time," James whispered. Regulus nodded in agreement.

"Let's see what we can find and then get out of here," Regulus whispered back. He already wanted to be gone. Something didn't feel right that night.

With seven ruined houses to investigate, they decided it would be faster if they split up. All the houses lined a street that ended in a cul-de-sac, so Regulus took one side, and James took the other. They intended to meet in the center at the final house, one that looked like it had been twice the size of the others. Regulus wondered if it had been the original target, if the others were just in the wrong place.

The first house Regulus checked still had the bones of a structure. He could see the way the walls had been burned by magical fire, the furniture inside the house now charred beyond recognition. There weren't any bodies, they would have been removed by now, but he saw a set of small bowls near the door and wondered if a loved family pet had also been destroyed by Death Eaters.

It was like penance, having to witness the damage the Death Eaters were doing. Coming face to face with all the wreckage, all the lives lost, it was a constant reminder of the poor choices he'd made in the past. He was quietly horrified by it all, but he was careful not to let it show on his face.

He didn't feel like he deserved to be comforted, and James, kind man that he was, would try and comfort him. He would try to make sure that Regulus wasn't too upset, that he didn't beat himself up for too long. Regulus didn't want that. He wanted to suffer just as he deserved. Perhaps if he survived the war, he would live long enough to live without guilt.

He didn't know if such a thing was possible.

He pushed for it anyway. He looked at the destroyed homes, the half-burnt clothing, the charred furniture, all of it. He took it all in, cataloged it in his head, made sure he would never forget it, then moved on to the next place. He was on his third house when he heard the crack of apparition.

Regulus threw himself to the ground. There wasn't much to hide behind; the house was burned to its base, but he was sure that if he was low enough, no one would spot him

immediately, especially in the dark.

He tried to search for James, but there was no way for him to see him from the ground. He could make out two people standing in the center of the street, though. They hadn't been there a moment before, so they must have been the wizards apparating in.

It could be Aurors. They'd seen Aurors show up more than once while they were looking for a trail to follow, but for some reason, Regulus was sure this time was different.

There was something in the air, a shift in the energy, a darkness settling over them like drool from the mouth of an angry, vengeful dog. They were in danger—Regulus knew that for a fact, but they were sharp too, knives in unexpected places, lashing out to survive. Regulus crawled on all fours against the dry grass to keep the two people in eyesight. They were heading toward the largest house, the one he and James were going to meet at. He couldn't see James, but he could feel him.

He wouldn't go for anything lethal first. He had no idea who he would be meeting in the field. But he had to make sure they were both incapacitated and quickly.

Regulus watched them stride toward the destroyed home, climbing up the stairs with a joyfulness in their steps that made him fill with rage. Once they were inside the border of where the house had once stood, Regulus made his move.

He didn't know what they were doing there, but it looked like they were looking for something. They seemed distracted. It was perfect. He jumped to his feet, using the ground to propel himself up and forward at the same time, and started sprinting toward them. He already has his wand out, a silent spell right on the tip as he ascended the steps two at a time.

One of them was hit with the spell, a simple but powerful stunning jinx. The man—Regulus could tell they were both men now that he was a bit closer—went flying forward as the spell hit him square in the back, his face smacking against the burnt rubble roughly. He threw another silent spell at the other man, but he wasn't quite quick enough.

These weren't ill-trained snatchers, these were Death Eaters, there was no doubt in Regulus's mind. The man threw up a silent shield, one powerful enough that Regulus had to roll out of the way to avoid being hit in the face by his own spell. By the time he was back on his feet, the man was already throwing spells at him. He kept winding up his arm like he was tossing a ball at him, and his spells came with a blunt violence that kept Regulus playing defense.

The man was still far enough away that Regulus couldn't make out the details of his face, the bright, violent spells blocking out any specific qualities he might have been able to make out.

Regulus was already sweating, but he was focused, matching each of the spells with a defense charm or a dodge, keeping out of the way. He just needed one opening. He thought he got it when the man turned slightly, but his shield was already in place, and though he stumbled back slightly when Regulus hit him with a burning curse, it wasn't enough to take him down.

Worse still, the man had used his one moment of distraction to remove the stunning spell Regulus had placed on the other man, and before he knew it, he was dueling two seasoned Death Eaters, neither of which was planning to let him live. Almost every fourth spell was the killing curse, the bright green burning into Regulus's retinas.

Where is James? Regulus thought just as James came sprinting into view. He was moving oddly as if he'd already been injured, but he was quick with his curses, and one of the Death Eaters had to turn his back on Regulus to deal with James.

It was like the back and forth of four beaters, spells flying with cutting brutality, not a word spoken between any of them. If someone was only a block away, they wouldn't be able to hear a thing. Most spells were silent, but even the darker curses that seared through the air with a crackle were only loud if someone was right next to them.

The worst thing about the fight was that the Death Eaters seemed to be in perfect sync; they'd likely been working together for years, and they managed to switch between James and Regulus with ease, switching sides and casting shields for each other with little thought. Having them next to each other wasn't going to work, but if he or James tried to run to lead one of them away, it was unlikely they would be followed. These men were too used to dueling. They knew it was suicide to willingly separate when they were more powerful as a team.

Regulus gritted his teeth and did something reckless. He cast three easy jinxes in quick successions, ones that didn't require much energy but would be enough to distract the Death Eater, and then he charged forward.

It worked, the Death Eater was too busy blocking his simple jinxes that he wasn't prepared for Regulus to slam into him. They hurtled to the ground in a heap, and Regulus finally got the upper hand, casting a cutting curse right as they slammed into the floor. He'd only made a small error, though he didn't realize right away.

He'd only meant to cut the man's wand arm, hoping to incapacitate him, but the man had shifted at the last second, and the spell had caught him straight across the throat. It was only when Regulus caught sight of his gasping face that he realized what happened. That realization came at the same second as the recognition.

It was exactly who they were looking for. They'd gotten unreasonably lucky, *insanely* lucky, impossibly lucky. Under Regulus, still kicking and fighting like knocking Regulus off would save him from bleeding out, was Rodolphus Lestrangle. Widower of Bellatrix Lestrangle. Death Eater and All Around Bell End. And he was dying.

"Se—Se—Se—" Rodolphus stuttered. Regulus didn't know what he was trying to say.

He looked up toward where Rodolphus's brother—Rabastan—stood, only a few steps away. He was still locked in a fight with James, his teeth bared. He looked like an animal; his eyes had a hungry glint in them that, for a moment, made Regulus feel like that same little kid who'd accidentally wet himself at his cousin's wedding.

When Rabastan turned to look at him, just long enough to catch sight of his dying brother, Regulus felt like a hunted animal. The feeling was gone in a second. He wasn't a tiny rabbit in the claws of a predator. He was just as dangerous as Rabastan was, more even.

"Little Regulus," Rabastan said, his voice a low hiss. It was enough to distract him, to pull his attention away from James. It was a fatal error, though Regulus had not seen that coming.

"*Confringo*," James growled. Fire spat from his wand and collided with the side of Rabastan's face, consuming him in an instant. He screamed horribly, his vocal cords melting under the heat of James's rage. James stumbled back right as Rabastan crashed to the ground. Regulus was still half on top of Rodolphus, but he could hear the way James heaved.

Regulus barely managed to stand before James was bending at the waist and vomiting right onto his shoes. Regulus hurried to his side, vanishing the vomit and gently rubbing his back until James calmed down enough to lean into him.

"I killed him," James whispered.

"We need to move," Regulus replied. He wanted to comfort him, to connect with him, to make sure James knew he hadn't done anything wrong, that it was all okay, but they couldn't afford to pause yet.

"Right," James breathed. Regulus stomped back to the bodies, both still and devoid of life. He double-checked for vitals with a quick spell, making sure there was no coming back from what they'd done, then he wrapped them both in rope and tied them to each other.

"I need the cloak," Regulus demanded. James handed the invisibility cloak over with a shaky hand. Regulus covered them both, grabbing the rope that held the Lestranges with one hand—casting a featherlight charm on them while he did so—and James's hand with the other. He squeezed it tightly, waiting until James squeezed back before he apparated them right into the belly of the beast.

The wizarding world had been decidedly off-limits for them since they'd started living in the tent, but Regulus needed the right people to know that the Lestrangle brothers were dead. He couldn't afford to wait on chance. If other Death Eaters arrived, they might decide to cover up the deaths rather than report them. He couldn't leave it up to them.

They landed in Diagon Alley right between two shops, and Regulus froze for a long moment, waiting for an alarm, but when nothing sounded, he hurried out of the alleyway and toward Gringotts. It was the middle of the night, so they wouldn't be open, but someone would be in there, and if Regulus knocked, a goblin would have to come out to check.

He rushed up the steps of Gringotts, never letting James's hand go the entire time, and dropped the bodies onto the doorstep. He slammed his fist into the door three times, then dragged James back down the steps to wait. It took only a few seconds before a goblin cracked open the door slowly. He looked in one direction, then another, then slowly his eyes dragged down to the corpses.

Once Regulus knew the goblin had seen them—the goblin already pulling out his wand—Regulus apparated away, towing a disturbingly silent James with him.

They landed in another forest, one that Regulus had only seen a picture of, and though James started shivering instantly and Regulus knew they had a long night ahead of them, he found that a weight had dropped off of his shoulders.

The Lestranges were dead, and he and James had killed them.

Chapter End Notes

summary: regulus has a past with rabastan and rodolphus lestrange, both of them were creepy toward him when he was young. regulus and james run into the lestrange brothers while investigating a death eater attack. rodolphus is killed by regulus and rabastan is killed by james.

the moon.

Chapter Notes

cw: violence, blood

It took Regulus three hours to set up their tent. They'd packed it up before heading to the Death Eater attacks, already planning to move it in case they had to leave in a hurry, but it took focus and magic to put it back up, and James was in such a state that Regulus couldn't quite find the focus that he needed.

He didn't like watching James unravel. James was supposed to be the balanced one. He was supposed to be the one who grounded everyone else. He wasn't supposed to be violently shaking in Regulus's arms, his breaths coming in quick, harrowing gasps like his throat was trying to close. Regulus felt ill-equipped to help him. He'd never calmed anyone like that except for Harry, but that was different. Harry was a child, he just needed someone to remind him that he didn't have to be responsible for everything and he could find a bit of safety.

Though Regulus could comfort James, he couldn't provide him with the same safety that he could a child.

Especially given that James wasn't afraid of what might happen to them. He'd killed someone, murdered them with his own magic, and Regulus was witnessing every pillar of self-definition crumble out from under him. James saw himself as someone who wouldn't murder someone, not in the way he just had, but now that wasn't true, so what of himself did he have left?

Regulus didn't know how to rectify that for him. He wasn't sure he'd ever experienced anything like it, he'd always had a low opinion of himself. There wasn't ever much to lose.

When James had finally calmed down enough to stand without being held up, Regulus set up the tent. Just in time, too, because right as they walked under the canvas cover, rain began to fall, overly fat drops that slapped against the ground and splattered into the tent's entrance. Regulus cast a charm to keep too much water from spilling in. He'd have to keep an eye on it, if it began to flood, they would need to relocate.

He settled James into a chair and lit a fire in the furnace. He was about to head for the kitchen when James spoke. They were the first words he'd said since they'd arrived.

"Are you disgusted by me?" James whispered.

"Why would you think that?"

"You should be," James whispered even lower.

“James,” Regulus said sharply. He was tired and irritated. James’s head snapped up as he turned to look at him, but his eyes were still glassy. “I just slit a man’s throat.” James flinched. “Does that disgust you? He’s not the only one I’ve killed, either. Do you want me to recount for you what I did to Umbridge?”

“No,” James breathed.

“No, what?” Regulus snapped. “No, you don’t want me to recount it, or no, you don’t think I’m disgusting?”

“I don’t think you’re disgusting,” James whispered.

“Then you’re not allowed to ask me that about you!” Regulus snarled. “To think for a *second* that I would be disgusted by you is an insult! I don’t care if you end up killing a hundred Death Eaters, you will never be disgusting. Got it?” He was yelling so loud by the end that his throat hurt.

James may as well have had stars in his eyes. He was staring at Regulus like it was his first time seeing him. His mouth was agape, and his cheeks were bright red.

“I love you,” James said earnestly.

Regulus’s heart rate hadn’t slowed yet. “I know that! I love you too,” he shouted roughly. It wasn’t exactly his nicest love confession, but it would have to do. He was tired and cold, his muscles had started to ache, and he was still so keyed up from the fight that he didn’t know when he would get to sleep again.

He turned away from James and stomped the four steps to the kitchen to start the kettle, then he yanked the charmed Galleon out of his pocket.

Claim the vaults, he wrote to Sirius. He waited for Sirius to respond, but it was the middle of the night, and he was likely sleeping, so the Galleon remained cold. He reached for the mugs to finish making tea and then jumped violently when he felt hands against his waist.

“James?” he asked like he didn’t already know. The warmth from James’s palms was already settling into his skin.

James placed a gentle kiss on the back of his neck. “Let’s go to bed.”

“I need to shower,” he replied automatically. “There is still blood on me.”

James hummed quietly. “Let’s shower then.”

“Together?” Regulus asked. James grabbed him by the hand in place of answering and dragged him to the shower. It was a new thing for Regulus, bathing with someone like that. He almost expected James to roughly push him against the wall and take him under the water’s spray, but he didn’t. His gentle hands worked against his skin, helping to clean him. Then Regulus did the same, taking his time working soap into each of James’s tense muscles. It was domestic and comforting.

By the time they climbed into bed together, his mind had settled, and the excitement from the day had been placed somewhere on a shelf. He still knew it was there, but it didn't feel so pressing. He was snoring before his head hit the pillow.

He checked the Galleon first thing when he woke the next morning. The bed was empty next to him, James was already up making breakfast.

"Nothing yet," he said right as Regulus grabbed the Galleon.

"Do you think he got the message?" Regulus asked.

"No way to know," James said with a shrug. "We can worry about it in a few days."

"If he doesn't get the vaults right away—"

"I know," James said soothingly. "I'm sure he will. There is nothing we can do about it yet anyway. We'll have to make a new plan if we don't hear from Sirius."

Regulus nodded and tried to slow his breathing. Everything felt so tense those days, they couldn't afford to make a single misstep, and Regulus could feel the pressure riding on his shoulders at every moment.

"What are you making?" Regulus asked to try and distract himself.

"Just some eggs," James said, frowning. "We'll have to go another food run sometime today. We're running low."

"I don't mind going," Regulus said. He didn't want to wait around, he'd barely been awake for ten minutes, and already he was feeling antsy.

"Are you sure? I can go with you."

"It's fine," Regulus said quickly. "I'll be back before you finish making breakfast."

James was giving him a questioning look, but he didn't stop him when Regulus went to grab the cloak. They'd gotten used to running out for food on their own. James was more comfortable with it having spent some time in the muggle world before, but Regulus was catching on quickly enough.

He apparated to a nearby village, using a charmed map that showed his current location so he could see what was close by. The map was James's invention, a bit of blood magic and some arithmancy, and there they were, a dot on the map. It only worked when one of them was holding it, it didn't work like the Marauder's Map, but it was still useful.

He didn't bother adding a glamour this time, just covered himself in the invisibility cloak and hurried into a shop, picking things off the shelves when he knew he was alone in an aisle. He grabbed a couple of different newspapers on his way out and apparated back to the tent only fifteen minutes after leaving.

James was just setting food down on the table when he came back, a measured look in his eyes.

“Anything?” Regulus asked.

James shook his head, and Regulus let out a defeated sigh. Where was Sirius?

Only the sounds of newspaper pages flipping and forks clinking against plates—James’s plate, to be specific, Regulus was too well trained as a child, he *never* let his utensils scrape against a plate—could be heard as they ate breakfast. There wasn’t anything to say. All they could do was wait.

The day dragged. Regulus was too worried about what was happening outside their tent's four walls to think about going through their daily routine. He tried everything he could think of to distract himself, but nothing could hold his attention for long, and he found himself reaching for the Galleon over and over again.

James kept him fed, and when it grew late, James put him to bed like he was an unruly child who needed to be taken care of.

He didn’t sleep for a long time, even as James’s breaths grew deep and even next to him. He honestly didn’t think he would sleep at all, but then the rain picked up outside again, and the sound of it hitting the canvas must have lulled him into a place of rest because the next thing he knew, James was jumping onto the bed next to him, bouncing Regulus awake.

“Huh? What?” he asked in surprise, his heart jumping.

“They found it!” James said far too loudly.

“What?” Regulus asked again, his brain struggling to wake up and understand what was going on. James waited for him to settle before speaking again.

“They found the Horcrux,” James announced.

“What!” Regulus yelled. This time it wasn’t a question, just a spark of excitement. “Show me!”

James held out the Galleon, and Regulus could barely slow his thoughts long enough to read the words ‘*We found it*’ etched on the front.

“I can’t believe it,” Regulus breathed.

“They came through,” James replied. “They must have been waiting to reply until they’d gotten into the vaults.”

“Ask them if they’ve destroyed it yet,” Regulus said. He could easily do it himself, but he still handed the Galleon back to James with shaking hands. James acted quickly, sending off their message as fast as he might have if they were talking out loud.

Regulus wished that they'd brought the mirror with them, he would have loved to see his brother's face when they shared the news. They'd chosen to leave it behind, it was too much of a risk. There was no protection on the mirror, so if anyone picked it up and called Sirius's name, he might not know not to show his face. And who knew who could appear behind him or what details that person could gain from seeing Sirius's surroundings? Not to mention that they'd gone to so much trouble keeping the location hidden from both Regulus's and James's minds that it seemed foolish to allow a bit of knowledge back in.

He was left to imagine Sirius in place of actually seeing him. He knew Sirius fairly well, though, he was pretty sure he could picture the exact look of triumph, relief, and smugness that he would be wearing. Regulus might roll his eyes at it, but inside him, the little boy who still thought his brother would always know what to do would feel soothed.

"They just wrote 'Tonight,'" James said. Regulus nodded once.

"They'll probably wait till the kids are asleep," Regulus said. "Wow." He flopped back against the bed, his chest opening up for the first time in weeks, and clean, fresh air filling him to the brim, so full that he felt like he might start floating. "I can't believe it worked."

"I knew it would," James said confidently.

"How did you know?" Regulus asked. "I thought it was a long shot."

James dropped the Galleon onto the bedside table—it hadn't originally been in the tent, but after they'd turned the bunk beds into one large bed, they'd added a few pieces of furniture, transfiguring them out of sticks found in the various woods they visited—then he dropped on his stomach, his arm coming around Regulus's waist, and pulling him close.

"Because it was your plan," James whispered.

Regulus laughed, staring up at James's glasses-free face. His hair was wild with sleep and fell around them like a curtain as if they were on their own private stage. "Not all of my plans have worked," Regulus said, though he couldn't remember a single one—success or failure, all of them seemed too far to reach.

James shrugged happily, his face gentle, malleable.

Regulus had always thought that his favorite version of James was the one he encountered late in the evening, the one that dragged him to bed, curling around him or pinning him to the mattress, carving out a space in the world for Regulus to feel safe and wanted. Even before they were sleeping together every night, the late-night version of James was his favorite. Like when he would visit Regulus up at the Astronomy Tower or out near the Black Lake. He was just making a little sanctuary for them, a moment of peace in a terrifying world.

He was still pretty sure that was his favorite James, he couldn't deny how much he loved him, but early morning James, first-thing-in-the-morning James? That was something special.

He was more physical in the morning, touching Regulus often and excessively. At night, it was like James was making himself large, like if he could surround Regulus enough, Regulus

would feel safe. But in the morning, it was like James was small, just a tender little thing.

Regulus could feel James's delicacy beneath his palms. As he grabbed James gently by the face and pulled him down so their lips could touch, Regulus could feel how tender the skin was, as if the fragile parts of James were on display.

They stayed in bed for the entire day after that, only leaving to relieve themselves or grab snacks from the kitchen. Neither of them seemed interested in the world outside. The fight was far from over, they both knew that, but they'd finally succeeded, they'd made tangible progress, and that deserved to be celebrated.

Late that night, the word '*Destroyed*' appeared on the Galleon, and Regulus slept better than he had in months.

After the elation wore off a bit, James and Regulus went back to their daily routine with a few changes. Things had slowed down for them. They were no longer searching for potential Death Eaters at the scenes of disasters. That was too risky after the Lestranger Brothers died—it made front page news at *The Daily Prophet*. There was a chance that the Death Eaters knew someone had it out for them now, and Regulus and James couldn't afford to be caught.

So instead of following the news looking for petty attacks—petty for Death Eaters, of course, they were tragedies for anyone else—and started looking for the most important player on the pitch.

Tom Riddle himself.

He didn't seem to leave whatever hole he was hiding in, or if he did, he wasn't leaving much of a trace. During the first war, it was obvious when Tom Riddle had been there.

"He wanted us to know it was him. Not the Ministry or the wizarding world at large, but the members of the Order of Phoenix. When people died at the hands of other Death Eaters, there would be so much property damage that often their homes looked unrecognizable. He wasn't like that. When Dorcas died, her apartment looked like it had been cleaned right after her death. That's how organized it was. It was eerie."

"How did you know it was him then?"

"It was something in the magic, a feeling. His magic is so dark it warps the world around him every time he uses it."

Regulus knew that fact well. He'd been able to taste that dark magic on his tongue when he'd been given the dark mark. He'd choked on it for weeks afterward, and had showered over and over again, hoping to wash it from his skin, it *lingered*. That kind of thing was difficult to share through the standard news, and there were so many disappearances that it was impossible to tell if people were actually being murdered and, if so, by who.

But they had to do something. They had to find the man. So they started tracking all of it, started cataloging all the details, looking for clues. By the time Tom Riddle left his hiding

place, Regulus would be ready for him.

That was the other thing that changed. Their training. They still dueled every single day, though they'd been getting more intense after the fight with the Lestranges, but they also added in practice using the sword. Regulus hadn't understood why Dumbledore had left it to him, and he still didn't quite get it, but while he had it in his possession, he was going to make good use of it.

James hadn't exactly been helpful at first, not when his first reaction to Regulus bringing the topic up was to say, "Wicked! Sword fighting!" But eventually, he had the good graces to focus, and together, the two of them learned how to fight with a sword.

They added other things to their daily routine, things that provided more comfort than training. So much of their day was filled with the details of horror and war, they had to find a way to form some moments of peace, otherwise they would lose all hope.

So they started showering together, using it as a way to pamper each other, to care for each other the way they needed to be cared for. They started playing games—mostly chess and exploding snap—to keep things light. And they started walking rather than apparating when at all possible. Like when they needed to move the tent, they would take a day off and walk until they couldn't walk another step and set up the tent.

Or, like that night, when they'd gone into a nearby village for groceries, they'd walk home from the shops, hand in hand like a normal couple, and descend into the woods to find their tiny haven.

In retrospect, they shouldn't have been out so late. It was just that Regulus was tired of having to weave around people when he was trying to steal from grocery stores, and James only felt okay stealing food if there was no one there to miss it in real-time. So they waited until the stores were closed and the street lamps were on before they entered the town.

They made quick work of gathering everything they needed and then walked out of town with the invisibility cloak hanging over them. When they reached the edge of the village, they removed the cloak and entered the forest. They weren't terribly far, only about half a kilometer away, so Regulus wasn't worried. They had their wands to light the way.

The problem was that he was so used to seeing by wandlight or street lamps or lanterns, that he didn't think to notice the bright shine of the moon above him. It didn't occur to him that it might be a problem. Especially once they were under the canopy of trees and the moon's light was blocked by random branches and leaves. It didn't even cross his mind.

It all happened so quickly after that. They were close to the tent, almost home, when the sound of rushing paws slamming against the ground caught his ears. He and James glanced up at the same time. It was coming from Regulus's left, from the same direction that James was standing. *James was standing in that direction.* That would be something that haunted him for a long time.

The creature's teeth came into view first, the light catching them only a split second before its eyes and furry face was visible.

Regulus didn't even have time to understand what he was looking at before James—the stupid, gentle, idiot fool—stepped right in the way. He'd already been more at risk, he'd been standing on the wrong side, he'd been standing too close, but then the creature charged, and James *stepped in the way*.

James slammed into the ground right as Regulus's brain screamed, '*Wolf! Wolf! It's a werewolf!*'

He dropped his wand and transformed on the spot, not even a thought crossing his brain as he did so. It was pure instinct, searching for the one thing that could keep him safe from a werewolf. He and the wolf were about the same size when he was a bear, so when he took a broad swipe at the wolf and dug his nails into its side, the wolf relented, taking several large steps back.

Regulus could tell it still wanted James, it still hungered for his blood and flesh, so Regulus lunged again. He chased the wolf until the wolf knew it was no use, that it would never get to James, not without dying, and it ran.

Regulus was back at James's side in a second. He wasn't sure if he ran back and then transformed, or if he somehow transformed and then apparated back. All he knew was that the moment the wolf was no longer a threat, he was human again and kneeling next to James, who was making horrible, inhuman sounds of pain.

"James, James, no," Regulus babbled again and again. He didn't know what to do. James was shaking violently on the ground, he was holding his side with both of his hands, his face deathly pale.

There was so much blood that Regulus couldn't tell where it ended, and the dirt began. James was covered in it, it seeped through his fingers, escaping him faster than he could survive.

They'd just destroyed another Horcrux, Regulus thought nonsensically. They were making progress. This wasn't supposed to happen. It felt like it was a dream.

James was supposed to be the one to survive, and now he was dying. He was bleeding out on the forest floor, and Regulus had never felt more useless.

the moon part II.

James always believed he would be a good boyfriend. That was probably a silly thing for a child to think about, but he'd been certain of it for as long as he could remember. He was a good friend—he knew that for a fact, his mum reminded him of it frequently and consistently—and he couldn't imagine that being a boyfriend would be that different. If he could be a good friend, he could be an *excellent* boyfriend.

He looked forward to the chance to prove himself. It turned out, he wouldn't really get much time to do it.

When he first went to Hogwarts, he'd picked Lily Evans as his future girlfriend. He could picture it perfectly, in his mind they were the ideal couple. Only Lily didn't really like him, she found him annoying, and her best friend hated him. James wasn't exactly a nice boy either, though he didn't know that yet. Still, he was determined, so as his friends were developing crushes and going on dates to Hogsmeade, James remained single.

He never felt lonely though. He knew he'd be a good boyfriend, but it wasn't like there was any rush. He wasn't pining. He was just persistent.

It wasn't until Sirius escaped with Regulus's help and James started seeking out Regulus that he learned about desire. Desire was different than what he felt for Lily. He could picture him and Lily together, they made a good picture, they made sense, but what he felt for Lily wasn't desire. It turned out to be something a lot more like friendship than anything, but he wouldn't realize that for several years.

When desire came crashing into his life, the idea of being a good boyfriend didn't seem like enough. In fact, he stopped caring about boyfriend possibilities at all. Instead, he thought about the way Regulus's pale skin flushed when James remembered something he'd said or the way Regulus's hair would curl around his ears, how James wanted to pull on those curls, tugged them just enough to make Regulus look up. James stopped picturing what he and Lily would look like together and he started imagining what Regulus would look like underneath him.

It was intoxicating. It kept him up late at night and filled his head through classes. It consumed him. Every inch that Regulus gave away, that he allowed James into his world, James coveted more and more.

He stopped thinking about the concept of being a good boyfriend altogether. It didn't matter with Regulus, all that mattered was the quiet sigh Regulus would release when their lips touched.

Then Regulus broke James's heart into a million tiny little pieces.

He'd avoided him for weeks and when James finally caught up to him, he'd shown him the mark. He'd been branded by a monster. At least, that's what his parents called him. James

had heard their worried whispers about disappearance and changes in the Ministry increasing all summer. And here Regulus was with that man's mark burned into his arm.

James had turned his back on Regulus, he'd shoved away everything about Regulus that drew him in, forced himself to stop thinking about all of Regulus's noises, about his soft skin and curly hair, about his piercing grey eyes. He'd shut it all behind an iron door and forced himself to move on.

However, once Regulus was shut away, James discovered a giant hole through the center of his life. Like Regulus had carved out a space for himself in James's chest and now that he was gone, there was nothing left there to close up the space.

James felt lonely for the first time in his life. Not the kind of loneliness he got from missing his friends or having to play alone, but the kind of loneliness that felt never-ending. He tried to hide it from everyone, but he always wondered if they noticed how he stopped talking so much, how he always sat with his back to the Slytherin table, how he stopped getting up extra early for Quidditch practice, how bits and pieces of him broke away until he was a skeleton of his former self.

Losing Regulus affected every single part of his life, it made the act of living so much harder, then Lily entered the picture and everything felt a little easier. They came together slowly, but it filled a bit of that space in his chest and made the world feel a little brighter. When he was older and wiser he realized that this was what it meant to have a friend who cared about you, but when he was seventeen, it felt like love.

When they started dating, James reignited his dream of being a good boyfriend. That was always what he'd known about himself, right? He just had to go back to that to find happiness. He invested time into his relationship with Lily, he tried harder than he'd ever tried at anything, he proposed after they graduated because that seemed like what he was supposed to do, and for a while, he didn't feel so lost or lonely.

Lily was who he'd picked when he was eleven, so clearly she was the right answer. She had to be. Only then they got married, and James wasn't a boyfriend anymore but a husband with responsibilities and a war looming on the horizon. Then Lily got pregnant, and James was a father.

Yet through all of it, that loneliness that had taken over after he'd lost Regulus had started to linger against his ribs. He started noticing that hole in his chest more and more. He felt empty, even with a wife and a child. He loved them both, but the way he'd cared for Regulus was so different, it was incomparable.

Before he died, he wondered if he would feel that emptiness for the rest of his life.

It was odd to look back at that so many years later, especially once he and Regulus crashed back together like two spells colliding. He'd been searching for meaning in the labels he would wear, boyfriend, being one of them, but only Regulus could pull on the strings of who he was. That's why losing Regulus was so painful because only he had access to the core of James's being.

He wondered if he was a boyfriend again, they hadn't discussed such a thing, but it seemed a bit silly given the circumstances. Then again, maybe Regulus didn't have the same expectations that he did.

"Are you my boyfriend?" he asked. Regulus looked like he was crying. His face was red and blotchy. It seemed like tears were running down his face, but James's vision felt blurred so he couldn't be sure.

"What?" Regulus asked, choking on the word. Maybe he really was surprised by the question, maybe Regulus never intended for them to be boyfriends.

"Are you my boyfriend?" James asked again. "I never asked you, I guess I kind of assumed, but—"

"James!" Regulus snapped. James could always tell when Regulus was trying to be harsh to cover up the pain he was feeling. He'd become very accustomed to seeing that expression on Regulus's face.

"What?" James asked. He could feel himself smiling. It seemed to just make Regulus angry.

"Now is not the time for this conversation!"

James frowned. "We have to talk about it eventually," James warned. He wasn't going to allow them to stay in limbo their entire relationship. James would be a very good boyfriend, he was sure of it, if only Regulus would allow him to fulfill the duty.

Regulus sobbed once, the noise ripping out of him so harshly that it looked painful. He bit down hard on his bottom lip to keep any more sobs from spilling out.

"I don't know what to do," Regulus whispered.

"That's okay," James soothed. "I've been a boyfriend before." Perhaps that was the wrong thing to say, Regulus looked like he was going to start sobbing again. He probably didn't want to be reminded of Lily. "You'll do great, I promise."

Regulus shook his head, his face flashing between the extremes of grief, incredulity, and anger so fast that James could blink and miss it. "You can't be my boyfriend if you're dead."

James laughed. For a second it felt like his brain was trying to remind him of something important, something he was ignoring. It was gone a second later. "I'm not going to die."

"You might," Regulus sobbed. The sobs didn't stop this time, James couldn't understand why he was so upset. He reached out a hand, intending to touch Regulus's face, but then he saw his fingers. They looked almost black with blood. James gasped making Regulus sober enough to see James's hand lifted.

Regulus grabbed his hand and pressed it back against his side. James cried out as a searing pain speared through him.

“Keep pressure on it!” Regulus shouted. “I’m trying to heal you!” Regulus looked down at his lap and James realized that he had a book spread out on his thighs. They were outside, but Regulus must have cast a floating *lumos* because it was impossibly bright.

“I’m bleeding,” James said. It felt like his mouth was disconnected from his mind. He hadn’t meant to speak, but his words slammed into Regulus like a physical blow.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. I’m trying. I promise. I’m trying,” Regulus rattled on.

“Regulus,” James whispered. “I’m bleeding.”

“I’m so sorry,” Regulus cried. James didn’t hear anything else he said because blackness pulled at his consciousness and he was gone.

James drifted in and out of consciousness against his will. Every time he was dragged to the surface, he was consumed by the pain. It felt like it was radiating all over his body. It always felt like the pain was forcing his body to shut back down, to black out his mind so he couldn’t feel anything. He was grateful for it, especially when he finally woke up longer than a few seconds.

The pain was unbearable, so bad that he couldn’t even speak. He couldn’t see without his glasses, but he was certain he was inside the tent on the bed. He gasped, feeling like a creature without teeth or a tongue, without the ability to make words. Regulus was there in a flash.

“Oh, Merlin. You’re awake. I didn’t know if you’d—you still have a fever. Can you drink a potion? I think it’ll help,” Regulus said, speaking so quickly that all the words combined into one jumbled mess, making it nearly impossible for James to understand what was being said.

James tried to reply, he really did, but he couldn’t speak. He wondered if he was dying. He almost hoped he was, the pain was that bad. Regulus pressed a potion to his lips and with great effort, James managed to swallow it down. The effect of it was instantaneous and he was out like a light.

When he woke again, the pain was reduced to a dull buzz in the background. It was still there, piercing and hot, but it wasn’t controlling him.

“Regulus,” he called, his throat scratchy like he’d been screaming. Regulus pressed someone else to his lips. He drank it without questioning what it was, wondering if Regulus was going to keep him drunk on potions until he finally expired. The liquid turned out to be water and it soothed his throat as it went down. “Thank you.”

“I’m so sorry,” Regulus whispered. James blinked at him, but even so close, he couldn’t see his face clearly.

“Gl—” James broke off to cough. “Glasses.”

Regulus moved quickly, fumbling loudly with James's glasses before sliding them gently onto his face. Regulus's drawn and sallow face came into view like a vision as if James was in some waking nightmare where Regulus looked like shit.

"What's wrong?" James asked. It was likely a stupid question but Regulus answered it anyway.

"I thought you were going to die. I thought I'd lost you," Regulus whispered. There were dried tear tracks on his face, but he wasn't crying now. His eyes looked slightly discolored like he was very dehydrated.

"What happened to me?" James asked. He couldn't recall anything. His mind must have been protecting him from it, but he had to know.

"I'm so sorry," Regulus said again. James tried to reach for him, it hurt to move his arm and he could only manage to inch it a bit closer in Regulus's direction. Regulus at least understood what he was going through and grabbed James's hand in both of his own, squeezing it like a lifeline.

"I forgive you," James said, mostly because he couldn't bear to hear Regulus apologize like that again. Regulus bowed his head.

"Why did you step in the way? Why didn't you run?" Regulus asked. He looked like he was refusing to meet James's eye.

"I don't know," James said honestly. "I can't remember anything."

Regulus made a quiet whining sound like a scream was trying to build up through his throat and he was refusing to let it out. "We were walking back to the tent from the village. It was a full moon. I'm sorry, I didn't realize—"

"A full moon?" James breathed.

Regulus made a sound like a sob but he still hadn't lifted his head so James couldn't tell if he was crying yet. "It was a werewolf. You were attacked by a werewolf."

"Oh," James said, the word punching out of him. That explained it, though it didn't bring the memories back. The pain in his side felt like something had dug its teeth into him and pulled. "I was bitten by a werewolf." Regulus nodded his bowed head. "On a full moon," James added. Regulus nodded again, this time letting out another small cry. "Oh."

"I'm sorry," Regulus whispered, so low that James almost couldn't hear it.

"It's okay," James replied.

"How can it be?" Regulus asked.

"Do you still love me?"

“What?” Regulus finally lifted his head to look at him. When their eyes met, he knew the answer, but he asked the question anyway.

“Do you still love me?”

They both knew what getting bitten by a werewolf on a full moon night meant. James knew better than most. He didn’t need to ask if he would change. He already knew and by the look on Regulus’s face, Regulus knew too.

“Of course,” Regulus said quietly. James nodded, he couldn’t speak for a moment. His throat felt tight with emotion.

When he could finally form a sentence without losing it, he said, “Will you get in bed with me?”

“Why?” Regulus asked even as he stood and slowly started climbing over James’s prone form to lay next to him.

“You look terrible,” James said bluntly. He wanted to pull Regulus against him but his arms were too weak. “You need to sleep.”

“You need more potions,” Regulus said. His words were already slurring, his eyes already dropping closed.

“I can take them later,” James said softly. Regulus tried to nod, but he was snoring before he got the chance. James smiled gently at him, taking a moment to feel the warmth radiating off of Regulus’s body. He kept himself focused on Regulus sleeping next to him, though he wanted to drag his eyes away and let the panic sweep him up, he knew it would do him no good.

He couldn't move, he couldn't sit up or stretch or walk around. If he started to freak out now, he wouldn't be able to do anything but sit in it. It was better to put it off, to shove it to the side and focus on what he knew. The future had just been uprooted. It had already been uncertain, but now it was like unplowed land.

Regardless, he would have plenty of time to worry about it later. For now, he would focus on the love of his life snoring softly next to him, his hands clenched in the quilt like he was holding on for dear life.

The sound of Regulus breathing eventually lulled him back to sleep, though it never felt quite restful. The pain never truly left him and even in his dreams, he could feel it rocketing across his body. He dreamed of teeth and blood, of Regulus crying. After a while those dreams shifted into true nightmares: Remus and Sirius staring down at him in disgust, Harry looking at him in fear, Regulus abandoning him.

When he woke next Regulus was placing a cold, wet flannel against his forehead.

“You have a fever,” he mumbled when James opened his eyes.

“Did you sleep?” James asked instead of responding.

“For too long,” Regulus said unhappily. “I shouldn’t have left you like that. It won’t happen again.”

“You have to sleep,” James said.

“Don’t boss me around,” Regulus snapped. James felt tears prick behind his eyes. Regulus sighed very quietly. “I need to take care of you. James, I don’t... I don’t think you understand how close you were to dying. And now, with the moon... who knows what will happen?”

“You don’t think I’ll change?” James asked, though he knew it was foolish.

“Not all werewolves survive the first transformation. It’s dangerous,” Regulus replied.

James tried to swallow but his mouth felt dry. He’d already known that, but when he’d learned it before it felt like some distant fact or like something he might attribute to Remus transforming as a child. He didn’t think about it as something real, something that could happen to him.

“You’re going to have to leave me,” James said.

Regulus sighed again, this time he sounded angry. “Don’t start this again.”

“No, no, I mean,” James hurried on to say, “it’ll be too dangerous for you. I could kill you. Oh, Godric, I might *kill you*.”

Regulus grabbed him by the chin and turned his face just enough so James was forced to look at him. “You’re not going to kill me,” Regulus said fiercely. “I’m an animagus. I’ll be fine.”

“We don’t know that,” James said quickly.

“Enough,” Regulus said. “We’re not focusing on that. Right now, we need to get through the fever.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Stop arguing with me and relax,” Regulus said.

“You need to work on your bedside manner,” James mumbled unhappily. Regulus huffed. He couldn’t tell if it was a noise of laughter or annoyance, it very well could have been a mixture.

“I apologize, should I go put on a medi-witch outfit first?”

“Yeah,” James muttered, sticking out his lip in a pout. “It would help.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Regulus said, moving away from the bed to grab another potion concoction that was a vague green color.

“And I’m pretty sure you never answered me before,” James said.

“About what?” Regulus asked, pressing the potion vial to James’s lips.

“About being my boyfriend,” James said, then swallowed the potion down. It tasted vile. He coughed violently and Regulus rushed to give him some water. It barely helped, just swishing the taste around in his mouth when he tried to swallow it. When he finally accepted that it wasn’t going away, he prompted, “Well?”

“Well, what?” Regulus asked. He seemed so dazed, James realized for the first time. Despite the fact that he’d slept earlier, he still looked haggard and exhausted. His eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed like he’d been crying. It made James's heart ache.

“Are you my boyfriend?”

“You were serious about that?”

“Why wouldn’t I have been serious?”

“You were dying?” Regulus said like that was some kind of excuse.

“So what?” James asked.

Regulus shook his head like he couldn't believe what he was hearing, but at least, he finally decided to take James seriously. “Yes, of course, I’m your boyfriend. We sleep together every single night.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re my boyfriend,” James said.

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Well, it’s not like monogamy matters all that much when we’ve been trapped in a tent alone for months.”

“So we’re not monogamous?” James asked, his stomach twisting. For a second he thought the potion was coming back up.

“No, we are,” Regulus said firmly, his eyebrows furrowing. “I just mean it doesn’t matter what label we slap on it right now. It’s not like either of us is going anywhere.”

James frowned thoughtfully. He wasn’t sure he had the mental fortitude to examine what Regulus had just said and the potion he’d ingested was already making him feel tired.

“It matters to me,” he said. He thought he might have been pouting again. By the soft look Regulus gave him, he was sure of it.

“You're my boyfriend,” Regulus said, brushing the back of his fingers against James’s cheek. “Happy?”

“Yes,” James mumbled just as sleep reclaimed him.

The next several weeks seemed to drag on in the same manner. It was like he could never get himself far enough out of the potion-induced haze to feel normal so time stopped meaning

the same thing. After about two weeks he asked Regulus if they should move, they'd been in the same spot since the full moon.

"It's too dangerous," Regulus said tensely. "You can barely walk to the bathroom, there is no way you can apparate right now." James knew he was right. When he'd stood up for the first time after being attacked, his legs had given out completely. It was like the pain was made new by the change in position. He still couldn't go without Regulus helping him.

As the next full moon drew closer, James wondered if he should be feeling different. He thought there might have been a change in his body, but he couldn't be sure. The potions kept him under so often that nothing felt real. He still hadn't thought about what the next full moon would bring, but when he woke up one morning to find Regulus sleeping at the kitchen table, he voiced a question that had been haunting him.

"Have you told Sirius and Remus?"

Regulus blinked tiredly at him. He looked terrible, his hair was stringy and matted down with oil like he hadn't been washing it, and his skin looked like he'd been scratching at it. James hurt for him, almost more than he hurt for himself. Regulus was suffering so badly and James couldn't do anything to help him.

"No," Regulus answered.

James nodded once. "Do you think we should?" He wasn't sure what answer he was hoping for. One part of him needed Sirius and Remus to know. They knew him better than anyone and they were intimately familiar with the whole werewolf thing, but another part of him felt a deep pit of shame every time he imagined them finding out. What would they think of him?

"I'm sorry," Regulus whispered. James hadn't noticed Regulus going through his own spiral, but now he could see that Regulus was just as tortured by that answer. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"You think they'll be mad at me?" James asked, biting his lip harshly right after the words escaped him. He felt like a fool.

Regulus's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "No, why would they—No, I don't think they would be mad, I think they would want to help and we can't afford for either of them to leave the others. They have to stay where they are and I know they won't be able to if they know what happened to you."

"Oh, right," James said quietly. He hadn't thought about it nearly as much as Regulus had, that much was clear.

"I could take you back—" Regulus whispered.

"No," James said, cutting him off completely. "I don't want that. I'm staying with you."

Regulus nodded faintly, averting his eyes like even looking at James hurt him. “I’m really sorry. I know you want them here.”

“I didn’t say that,” James said quickly, though he had to admit, there was a part of him that did. If only to give Regulus a break.

“They would be better at this,” Regulus said quietly. “They would know how to take care of you.”

“That’s not why I asked,” James said, suddenly very keen on explaining himself. He wouldn’t allow Regulus to beat himself up, not when he was running himself into the grave trying to keep them afloat. “I just—I was supposed to take care of you, that’s why I came, and now I’m injured and I’m probably a werewolf. Wouldn’t they think I was—” He didn’t even know how to finish his thought. He didn’t even understand the tightness in his chest, not completely.

Regulus visibly relaxed, his shoulders settling like a weight had been lifted off of them. “They would never be upset with you over this.”

A lot of their conversations went like that, James voicing insecurities he didn’t even know how to feel, and Regulus soothing them in the abrupt and abrasive way he did many things. James knew him well enough to know it was love.

The night before the full moon, James voiced another question he dreaded asking. “What about Wolfsbane Potion?”

He felt more than saw Regulus shake his head. They were lying side by side in the bed, their shoulders pressed up against each other, but Regulus had charmed a hole in the roof of the tent so they could see the stars above them. The moon’s rays were spreading across the sky. It wasn’t quite full and James was struck for a moment with the thought that he would never again see a full moon, not as a human being.

“I don’t have the materials to make it, and I’m not sure if you can take it for the first moon. We’ll try to figure it out for next time. Maybe I can steal some of the ingredients.”

James expected that answer, but it still made a knot of worry form in his back. “Where have you been getting all the other potion ingredients?”

Regulus seemed reluctant to answer. James squeezed his hand gently. “Kreacher,” he finally confessed. “He’s been bringing me ingredients that aren’t tracked by the Ministry.”

“I didn’t realize that,” James said.

“It could put us in danger,” Regulus whispered. “He could betray us. He knows where we are right now, but I couldn’t leave you here. I had to take the chance.”

“It’s okay,” James replied, squeezing Regulus’s hand again. They hadn’t had sex since before he was bitten and for the first time, he felt the lack of physical contact like a missing jacket—cold and windswept in a harsh environment. “I understand.”

They didn't speak again that night, though James still felt like there was a lot to say. Even on the morning of the full moon, they didn't talk about what was to come. It was like a block had appeared in his brain and was keeping him from thinking about what he was about to experience. He was going to turn into a wolf, his body was going to break apart and knit itself back together, not once but twice within the next twenty-four hours. He couldn't wrap his head around it, it still felt unreal.

"You have a fever again," Regulus said with a frown. He was feeding James breakfast in bed. James was well enough to walk around a bit now, but Regulus still insisted on keeping him bedridden most of the time. It seemed to stress him out every time James moved, so James let himself be babied.

"It might just be the moon," James said. "I think Sirius mentioned something about Remus always being hot right before the transformation. Though, arguably, he could have meant something else."

Regulus snorted a laugh. It made James smile. Regulus had laughed so infrequently since James was bitten and he'd missed the sound.

"It might be," Regulus agreed after feeling James's forehead again. "It's hard to tell. I'm going to give you another potion after lunch. You'll need to rest before tonight." He said it simply like he was talking about a big trip James was about to go on. It was like they were sidestepping the conversation every time they talked.

James took his potion that afternoon without complaint and he managed to get in a long nap before the sun started to set. It was his bite that woke him. The pain was overpowering and he nearly fell out of bed when he felt it. "It hurts," James hissed.

"Is it starting?" Regulus asked, he was frantic.

"No, not yet," James said. It was too early, he knew it in his bones. "It's the bite. It feels like it's on fire."

"I—I don't know what to do," Regulus confessed. He sounded so helpless.

"Take me outside," James said. "The cold air—I think it might help."

Regulus nodded rapidly, then half dragged James out into the winter night. It was ice cold, but the air still refreshing on his fever-sweat-slick skin. He breathed a sigh of relief and lowered himself onto the ground, laying flat on his back on the forest floor. He didn't care about the dirt, it was the only way his bite felt less painful. Regulus knelt next to him, but he seemed to not know what to do with himself.

James stared up at the darkening sky. It wouldn't be long now. Though the potion from earlier was still flowing in his veins, he was starting to feel a pull from the sky like a dementor trying to pull his soul from his chest. It was frightening, truly frightening. He no longer had control of his body, that much was strikingly clear now. He was going to lose himself tonight and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Will you kill me?” James whispered. Regulus made a sound like he was being choked, then coughed twice to clear his throat.

“Is this a suicidal request?” he whispered back.

“No,” James said, he didn't look away from the sky. “I mean, if something goes wrong, if it's me or you, will you kill me?”

“James—”

“Please, just answer me,” James begged.

“I will not answer you,” Regulus said firmly. James's eyes snapped to his face of their volition, the sharpness in Regulus's tone always drew him in. “Now stop asking maudlin questions. I'm not Sirius, I do not find self-pity attractive.”

“Wow,” James mumbled, trying not to laugh. “Are you talking about Remus?”

“Yes,” Regulus said. His irritation seemed to have momentarily distracted him from his panic. “You're not allowed to send me away because you think you're a monster. I won't go and I'll be angry with you afterward.”

A bewildered and incredulous laugh bubbled up out of James's chest. It shook him, exasperating his bite. The pain barely affected him though, not when he couldn't stop laughing. After a moment, Regulus started laughing too.

For a moment they were just two young men, crowded close under the night sky, enjoying each other's company, laughing together, healing together. The moment passed when James felt pain shoot up both of his legs. Both of them sobered in an instant.

“It's starting,” James whispered.

“I know,” Regulus said. He grabbed both of James's hands for a moment, leaning down to kiss him harshly on the mouth.

When he pulled away, James finally voiced the thought he'd refused to acknowledge. “I'm afraid.”

“I'm here,” Regulus said. “I'll be here when you wake up tomorrow morning.”

James wanted to respond to him, he wanted to tell him that he loved him, he wanted to thank him for being there, he wanted to say anything, but all at once, the pain was too much and all he could do was scream.

the hermit.

Chapter Notes

cw: food issues

Every summer when Harry was forced to return to the Dursleys, he felt like he was being ripped from the wizarding world. He would spend those long summer months wondering if he ever really belonged at Hogwarts. It wasn't that the Dursleys felt like the right place for him, it was just that when Hogwarts and all of his friends vanished from his life—only accessible by letter—he started to question his own sanity. He longed for Hogwarts but also felt greedy and like he was pining for something that didn't belong to him.

Even after he stopped returning to the Dursleys, when Remus came to rescue him following Regulus's death, Harry still wondered about his place in the world. He told Hermione about it once, hoping she'd understand since she also came from the muggle world.

"Pureblood wizards want us to feel that way. They think we don't belong. I don't believe that's the truth though. I'm a witch just as much as anyone else," she told him. She was very sure of herself, even when she wasn't. There was a reliance there that came from knowing that she could figure anything out, she was capable, and even as a child, she knew that well.

Harry was capable too, at least that's what people told him, but he never really felt that way. He'd destroyed Voldemort once, but that wasn't really him. He was a baby, he didn't even remember it. He'd killed a basilisk and survived the Triwizard Tournament, but it always seemed like he was running on instinct, not that he had any reliable skills to fall back on.

He was good at being a wizard, but only on accident.

That destabilized his place in the world. It made him feel unwelcome.

He should have realized that that feeling would only get worse when he was forced to leave Hogwarts, when he was told he wouldn't be returning.

It wasn't the same as living with the Dursleys—he was safe, he was cared for, he was never starved or locked in a cupboard—but there was a similarity in the way it made him feel. As if he was detached from his home and told '*one day you might return*' without any guarantee of that world welcoming him back.

What was worse than that feeling though, was the feeling of guilt that came along with it. Remus and Sirius were doing a lot to keep his world from changing too much, they were trying hard to keep him happy—along with Hermione and Malfoy—yet Harry couldn't stop feeling ungrateful.

After Regulus and James left, the world shrunk to the walls and ground of Black Manor, and Harry's days gained a monotonous quality that slowly started to drive him insane. That was the only explanation he could come up with for the way things happened.

They all spent the first few days after Regulus and James departed avoiding each other. Hermione found the library in the Manor quickly after they moved in, a room that hadn't been touched by anyone beyond his father in decades. It had a massive selection of books, most of which were no longer available to the public. It was like it was perfectly made for Hermione. Once she entered, Harry wondered if he would ever see or talk to her again.

Sirius spent his time out in the greenhouse. It was barren, but they needed materials for potions so he'd taken to getting it up and running. He didn't care much for Herbology, he'd told Harry that more than once, but it was necessary and Remus was busy enough without it being added to his plate.

Remus started spending long hours in a few locked rooms in the west corridors of the Manor. All of the bedrooms were in the east corridors—James had told him that—and the west corridors were for staff originally. The north and south corridors were for guests though still divorced to allow for a separation between important and wealthy guests compared to poorer guests. A long hallway ran through the center of the manor, the only room besides the library that extended up the four levels. Harry didn't know what Remus was doing in the staff corridors, but he felt bad about potentially interrupting him, so he didn't ask.

Malfoy stayed locked in his bedroom. Harry was pretty sure he only unlocked his door when Sirius placed food outside his bedroom, though Harry never actually caught a glimpse of Malfoy reaching out for it.

Harry spent his time doing what he did best: exploring. He didn't have his cloak, James and Regulus had asked to take it with them and Harry wouldn't have denied them anything, but it turned out that he didn't need it. No one cared what he was doing, he only saw Sirius or Remus when he bothered to visit the kitchens. They didn't eat meals together during those first few days, but there was almost always food on the counter waiting under a stasis charm.

So Harry was alone and largely unsupervised.

He stared exploring in the east corridors. He knew his room and Hermione's room fairly well, Hermione always left her door open so he'd poked around in there. He didn't know anything about Malfoy's room which was just as well. He didn't *care about Malfoy*. That much was perfectly clear. The soul fragment from Voldemort was gone and he was free, he no longer cared what Malfoy did or how he lived.

Regulus's bedroom was empty—as to be expected—and Harry kept that door closed. It made him hurt to see it barren and he missed Regulus more than he could say, so he kept it out of sight. James's room was much the same, if not far less decorated than Regulus's room. Harry thought that was weird at first given that James had spent the most time at Black Manor out of all of them, but after a while, he realized that James was just the type of man to put a lot more effort into decorating Regulus's space than his own.

Remus and Sirius shared a massive suite at the very northwest corner of the Manor. Harry hadn't been inside it, but he imagined it was nice. It felt wrong to enter their space now that they were married.

The other rooms in the east corridor were either empty bedrooms, bathrooms, and closets, or cozy sitting areas and offices. One room looked like it had once been a music room, but maybe a private one. It was small, with a broad window that overlooked the decaying gardens, with an old, dusty grand piano in the center. Other instruments lined the walls, all of them in a state of disrepair. Harry had never learned to play an instrument—the Dursleys never would have paid for it and he never had the drive to seek one out by himself.

He wondered about who had used the room before. It looked like it had been nice in its heyday, someone clearly loved it once, but the longer he stood in it, the more it felt like a cage. Someone had been kept there, probably tucked away so that they wouldn't be seen by the public eye. The person who put them there cared about them, they loved them, but not enough to let them be free.

Abruptly, he was sure they were a squib. He didn't know how he knew but he knew. Birthing a squib was considered shameful for old pureblood families. It made perfect sense that they would be locked away.

Harry didn't like the room very much after that. He shut the door and avoided the room altogether.

Once he grew bored of the east corridors, he moved on to the north corridors. The manor had once been excessively opulent and though Harry could see all the ways it was decaying, he could also tell which rooms James had gone out of his way to clean and repair. At the back of the manor, there was a massive ballroom, almost half the size of the Great Hall.

Harry was embarrassed to admit that he spent nearly fifteen minutes shouting just to hear the echo the room made. He could fly a broom around inside it. The moment he had that thought, it was all over. He spent at least two days flying around the ballroom, chasing the Snitch Dumbledore had left him.

He explored the many parlors throughout the north corridors after he grew too sore to fly in the ballroom—flying continuously for two days wasn't exactly the best choice—but he quickly grew bored with the rooms. He had no use for parlors and he could only imagine the unsavory sorts who used to frequent the manor.

After about a week he'd explored most of the east and north corridors. He was lying in bed one morning, considering which area of the house to explore next—he was sure he'd seen a wide set of iron doors leading to the cellar, that could be interesting—when Remus interrupted him. The knock at the door was light, just a few quiet taps, but it made Harry jump. He was so used to being alone.

“Harry,” Remus said through the door. “Can I come in?”

“Sure,” Harry replied, sitting up in bed.

Remus always had an emaciated and slightly unkempt appearance, even when he was a professor, but since he and Sirius had gotten married, it was like something had shifted. He'd started dressing better and resting more, the circles under his eyes faded, and his scars looked less inflamed. He still walked with a cane most days, but Harry noticed that he leaned on it less. He surprised himself by feeling a great deal of relief over Remus's health improving. He hadn't realized how much it bothered him until it had been fixed.

"Good morning," Remus said. His voice was deep like he was still shaking off the effects of sleep. Harry very much doubted that was the case, he was sure that Remus was an early riser. "We're thinking about making breakfast for everyone, will you come down to the dining room?"

"Yeah, okay," Harry said, giving Remus a nod. "Are you inviting—"

"We need to talk to you three about something," Remus said, only a little chiding in his tone. Harry tried not to laugh.

He dressed slowly, all the while wondering if Malfoy would deign to join them and then berating himself for thinking so much about Malfoy. It was a bad habit he needed to shake. He was the last one to get to the dining room, though it looked like Hermione was just sitting down at the long table when he entered. He quickly sat next to her.

The table had twelve chairs around it with one on each end, but Harry and Hermione sat close to one end, Sirius sitting at the head with Remus on the other side of him. Malfoy sat three chairs down making him look like an island of himself. His hair looked a bit too long like it had been a long time since he'd cut it, it hung limply over his eyes, the hair gel he used must have been left behind. It made him look softer, Harry realized, the thought occurring to him right as Malfoy glanced up, their eyes locking for only a second before Harry turned away.

"What's this about?" Harry asked.

Sirius glanced at him questioningly. He'd been staring at Remus, neither of them were talking, but they seemed to be able to communicate without speaking.

"Oh, right," Sirius said. "Let's eat first."

Harry settled back into his chair, taking in the excessive spread of breakfast food that lined the table. It was far too much for five people, he wondered if they were expecting guests. He piled his plate high with eggs, bacon, sausage, and toast, digging in immediately. Hermione only had a few things on her plate and Malfoy had even less. Harry wondered if he was starving himself, he didn't look any skinnier, but then again, it was hard to tell when he was covered head to toe in black clothing.

Hermione elbowed him hard in the side.

"*What?*" he mouthed.

"*You're staring,*" she mouthed back, gesturing toward Malfoy with a flick of her eyes. He rolled his eyes dismissively but couldn't stop the blush that spread across his cheeks.

“So, we know that you’ll be missing out on classes this year,” Remus said, speaking like he’d written down what he wanted to say.

“Obviously,” Sirius added with a quiet smirk.

“But we don’t want to detract from your education just because you won’t be returning to Hogwarts,” Remus continued as if Sirius hadn’t spoken. “James was the one to suggest this though so if you dislike it, please blame him.”

Harry and Hermione laughed politely, Malfoy didn’t make a sound.

“Remus and I have been divvying up the subjects and we’ve decided that in September, we’ll start holding classes for you three. That way you can still take your N.E.W.T.s at the end of the year. Hopefully, everything else will be cleared up by then, and you’ll need your N.E.W.T.s if you want to move on.”

The mention of ‘*everything else*’ seemed to bring down the temperature of the room by a few degrees, but it was saved by Hermione’s enthusiasm.

“You’re going to teach us?” she gasped.

Remus nodded.

“Are you asking or telling us?” Malfoy asked, his voice devoid of emotion beyond empty politeness. He hadn’t looked up from his half-eaten breakfast plate. He seemed so different from the arrogant boy Harry knew at Hogwarts, yet the set of his shoulders still held a pride that Harry couldn’t touch.

Remus tried to answer first. “Well—”

“Telling you,” Sirius interrupted gruffly. “You need to have some structure here. Classes will help us do that.”

“Very well,” Malfoy said in a clipped voice. He stood from the table, seeming to hesitate for a moment like he might try and ask if he could be excused then thought better of it. He turned and walked gracefully out of the dining room, not looking back once.

“You could have been nicer,” Remus whispered. Harry was sure he and Hermione weren’t meant to hear it.

“Whatever,” Sirius said. Harry hadn’t talked to anyone but Hermione about Malfoy living there. He’d spoken to Regulus a bit, but it didn’t seem like there was much to say. He had complicated feelings about it obviously, but he hadn’t paused to wonder how anyone else felt. Hermione seemed unbothered by his presence.

“It’s not like he can go home,” she said pragmatically. “It makes sense that Regulus would want to protect him. You know how he is.”

“I know,” Harry mumbled.

“Just avoid him and you’ll be fine,” she said with a dismissive pat on his shoulder. Hermione was more worried about Ron than she was about Malfoy living with them, Harry already knew that, so he didn’t blame her for her lack of sympathy.

"I wish we could write Ron a letter," Harry had said to her shortly after they moved into the manor.

Hermione hadn’t been able to respond to him then, she’d seemed too shaken by everything to do much of anything. Going through the book Dumbledore had left her seemed to be the only thing that kept her going those first few days. Once she discovered the library, everything else seemed to settle for her. Harry knew she worried about Ron often, but at least she had books and learning to keep her company.

Harry didn’t have the same distractions. He had his broom and the Snitch from Dumbledore, but that could only hold his attention for so long before he started worrying about the world outside the *Fidelius Charm*. Even the Snitch presented a worry, though he usually was able to ignore that unanswered question when he was chasing it.

Why had Dumbledore left it to him?

It kept him up at night wondering, but he hadn’t figured it out yet and Hermione was just as lost.

Worrying about the Snitch took a back seat once classes with Remus and Sirius began. They’d given them all a full schedule, despite their limited time and abilities, all the classrooms—if they could even be called that—were along the west corridors. At least that explained what Remus had been up to.

Sirius taught Transfiguration, Herbology, and Potions. He wasn’t that good at Herbology or Potions, he spent most of their time together reading closely from a N.E.W.T.s preparatory book, but it was still helpful. Especially once they started growing plants needed for potions.

He also taught Astronomy and Ancient Runes, but only to Hermione and Malfoy. Harry wasn’t planning to take either of those courses so he didn’t bother to take them now. He’d never been that good at Astronomy and he hadn’t even attempted Ancient Runes back at Hogwarts.

Remus taught Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. He was already the best Defense professor they’d ever had, but it was different being in such a small class with him. Harry was enthralled by the course. Their education had taken a dive in fourth and fifth year because of their terrible teachers, but Remus was quick to bridge the gap.

Like Sirius, he had a couple of courses that he taught just to Hermione and Malfoy: History of Magic and Arithmancy. While Hermione and Malfoy were in those classes, Harry spent time with Sirius. It had been a while since they’d had time to spend just the two of them, but he found that it was just as comforting as it had been before.

Most of the time they just talked, but sometimes they would fly together along the edges of the *Fidelius Charm* or would practice dueling. Harry loved it, he always felt like the anxious

feeling that ran under his skin would leave once he spent some time burning off energy with Sirius.

Living at Black Manor wasn't as bad as he'd thought it would be, but that didn't mean it was perfect.

He was still lonely sometimes, he missed Ron and his other friends, he worried about Regulus and his father nearly every single day, and longed for a life where Voldemort never existed. He'd never bothered to fantasize about that before, knowing it was useless, but now it weighed heavily on his mind. The desire for freedom was like a physical weight tied around his ankles.

He didn't sleep well in the manor. His bed was too nice and his room was too big. It wasn't what he was used to. Usually, he would toss and turn late into the evening, but some nights, when the antsy feeling got to be too much, Harry would go wandering.

Most nights he'd find himself tracing the same pathways he walked during the day, nosing about in the south corridors, visiting the ballroom in the north corridors, and passing by the kitchen and dining room, checking to see if food might settle him enough to put him to sleep. It never seemed very enticing. He hadn't had much of an appetite lately, he knew the lack of sleep wasn't helping, but he worried that he'd gotten so used to starving as a child that he was a bit comforted by it.

It was his third visit to the kitchen that week and he was walking in the pitch dark, not even bothering to use his wand to light the way. Still, despite the lack of light, the sight of white blonde hair seemed to glow like a beacon.

"What are you doing down here?" Harry asked gruffly.

Malfoy jumped, dropping something he was holding. It must have been a mug, Harry concluded when he heard the sound of ceramic shattering across the floor.

"Potter," Malfoy sneered. Harry could hear the sneer in his voice without even having to see him. He was very familiar with the sound. "Following me, are you?"

"You wish," Harry snapped. "Why are you out of your room?"

"I'm not a prisoner. I can go wherever I want," Malfoy snapped back.

"Whatever," Harry responded. Silence settled over them like the humidity before a storm, thick and tense. Harry didn't want to be in a room with Malfoy, but he suddenly didn't want to be the first to leave. Malfoy shouldn't be skulking around in the middle of the night anyway.

He couldn't make out Malfoy's features, but he was sure he was being glared at. Harry crossed his arms tightly over his chest, shifting on his feet. He hadn't bothered to put on shoes and his toes were starting to grow cold.

“Well?” Malfoy asked finally. Harry could just catch the motion of his pale skin as he threw his hands out in anger.

“Well, what?” Harry responded.

“What do you want?”

“I don't want anything.”

“Then why are you down here?”

“I was—I was looking for—It's not important,” Harry snarled. His face burned with embarrassment that he didn't understand.

“Why are you even awake right now?” Malfoy asked.

“It's none of your business,” Harry said.

Malfoy sighed angrily, then whispered under his breath, “*Reparo.*” A moment later, Harry heard the sound of something being placed on the kitchen counter, then Malfoy was moving toward him. Harry took a step back, then regretted it. He wouldn't show weakness in front of Malfoy. He took a step forward right as Malfoy went to pass him causing them to slam into each other.

Harry expected to be shoved aside, instead he felt Malfoy's hands grip his upper arms tightly, tight enough to hurt, tight enough to make him feel real. For a split second, the memory of them in the bathroom was the only thing he could see. He yanked himself out of Malfoy's hold, stumbling back two steps.

He wished it wasn't dark, he wished he knew what face Malfoy was making as he stared him down. He could feel Malfoy's eyes on him, his hair still glowing like a beacon, but Malfoy's silent stature gave nothing away. He made a noise like he was clicking his teeth together, repeating it three times, then he spun around and vanished through the kitchen doorway.

Harry didn't sleep at all that night. It was like he could feel Malfoy's hands on him even as the night dragged on.

Some of the classes Remus and Sirius taught were harder than others. Remus wasn't forgiving with his homework assignments, often asking them to write long essays before each class. Sirius wasn't one for homework, but he was sharp with his questions and Harry found himself studying more than he ever had while at Hogwarts.

It was different with Remus and Sirius as professors. He didn't want to disappoint them by being a mediocre student.

But even as he worked more, it wasn't anything compared to Hermione and Malfoy who were taking far more subjects than he was. Every time Harry happened upon Hermione, she had her nose deep in a book, one of her hands moving rapidly across a piece of paper—he

and Hermione had stopped using parchment and quills. Remus preferred the muggle methods too so he made sure the manor was well stocked.

Harry tried studying with her during those first few weeks, but she was easily irritated by the noises he didn't realize he was making and the way he fidgeted restlessly while trying to read. She didn't kick him out exactly, but she gave him enough dirty looks that he moved on to studying elsewhere.

He found the best place to read was floating dangerously high off the ground on his broom. He would balance precariously on it, challenging himself, then lean back, throwing his legs off either side. He preferred to do it outside, but the weather was unpredictable, so he spent most of his time inside the ballroom.

No one ever visited him there, which he didn't mind. He even liked it at first, though after a while it did get a bit lonely.

One afternoon sometime in early October he abandoned his flying, his eyes growing tired from reading for so long, and went in search of Hermione. It wasn't too late so he was hoping he might be able to drag her away from her books long enough to occupy some of his time.

Instead, he discovered her bent over a table full of books sitting next to Malfoy.

"Hermione!" he shouted.

Both of them glanced up to look at him, Hermione appearing dazed like she was still mentally lost in the words before her. Malfoy's face was unreadable, carefully blank.

"Oh, hi, Harry," Hermione said blandly, bending back over the book, the sound of her pen scratching against the paper the only noise beyond Harry's labored breathing.

"You two are studying together now?" Harry asked petulantly. He hated the way his chest tightened. Like a child being left out of a schoolyard game, he felt the sting of rejection and loneliness.

"I'm going back to my room," Malfoy mumbled, hurrying out of the library without bothering to grab anything beyond his quill and parchment. He wasn't ever going to use muggle technology, of that much Harry was very sure. Harry glared at him as he left, but Malfoy didn't bother looking at him.

Hermione didn't watch him leave, but she managed to speak the moment Malfoy was gone. "We're just studying next to each other," Hermione said, her voice careful like she knew he'd be upset. It didn't help the anger crawling up his throat. "We have more classes together."

"But he's Malfoy," Harry argued.

Hermione sighed and looked up at him tiredly. He could already hear the speech she was going to give him, and none of it mattered anyway. He didn't care if they studied together, he cared that he hadn't been included.

“Forget it,” he snapped before she could even open her mouth. He turned to leave but not before catching the sight of her face falling. He didn’t turn back to apologize, though he knew he should have. He was just so angry. He missed Ron. Ron would have spent time with him. Ron wouldn’t have made him feel like some hyperactive kid who needed to be worked around, who needed to be ignored.

He slammed into his bedroom and locked the door, throwing himself into bed like a kid throwing a fit. At some point later he heard a quiet knock at the door, Sirius’s voice drifting in asking if he wanted to do something together. Harry didn’t answer him, then he felt so guilty about not responding that he didn’t bother going down to dinner. He didn’t leave his room until the next morning, picking at the food that Remus had left out, pretending he was eating it, before he went to Charms and pretended that nothing was wrong.

“We can work together if you want,” Hermione whispered to him afterward. Remus and Sirius insisted they have different classrooms for every course. It seemed a bit asinine in Harry’s opinion, but Remus and Sirius seemed so excited about it that he didn’t bother saying anything.

“It’s fine, Hermione,” Harry replied. Malfoy was still in the Charms classroom, a long room with four chairs pushed against the wall. Remus would pace in front of them most of the time, half-reading out of a textbook. “I’m glad you have someone to study with.” He worked to keep his voice light. It wasn’t Hermione’s fault they were all hiding there. If anything, it was his fault, and he didn’t want to take it out on her.

She didn’t say anything for a long moment, but then she reached down and squeezed his hand. Her fingers were warm and soft, he found them comforting. “Thanks,” she whispered.

Harry stayed out of the library permanently after that. He didn’t feel welcome there, not that he’d ever been very good at studying in libraries. He kept to the empty rooms in the north corridors, making his own gilded cages out of the parlors and the ballroom. Much like the music room he’d avoided since that first day—a place where no one had to see him.

The nighttime wandering got worse as October wore on. He wasn’t keeping close track of the days, but when he woke sweaty and screaming from a nightmare about his mum, he knew it was Halloween.

It was a Friday so they were supposed to have classes, but when Harry trudged down to breakfast, Remus let him know that they’d decided to take the weekend off. They were dead center between the full moons, but Remus still looked exhausted. When he transformed, he and Sirius would go out to a small building on the very edge of the property. It was still inside the *Fidelius Charm* but far enough that it made Remus feel secure, at least that’s what Sirius had told Harry.

“The Wolfsbane makes him sleep through most of the night, he’s as harmless as a kitten,” Sirius said to him one afternoon, snickering at his own joke. “But he doesn’t want to risk it. We still put wards up to keep us in and keep you three out.”

He always looked like he'd been hit by the Knight Bus after every full moon though. He would miss whatever classes they had the day after, and when he finally showed back up, he'd moved slowly for half a day or so.

Remus looked like that again now despite the nearly new moon the night before. Harry guessed that Halloween was just as horrible for him as it was for Harry. If not worse. Harry didn't remember his parents dying, but Remus had lived it. Harry was sure it still haunted him.

Harry spent most of Halloween alone, as he did most other days. He walked the long corridors, making note of the doors he'd yet to open and the rooms he still needed to explore. He noticed a small door in the back of the kitchen. He wondered where it might lead, it looked about the size of a house elf. He was sure he could squeeze in if he was careful.

He added it to his list. He wasn't sure he wanted to squish into a tiny room on Halloween of all days.

It had been raining for nearly a week and a half at that point, but in the late afternoon, right as the sun was beginning to set, the rain cleared and the clouds started to separate. Harry took advantage of it immediately.

He hadn't had a good stretch of time outside in a long while. He rushed to get his broom and the Snitch whose purpose still alluded him and hurried outside. He flew over the manor for the rest of the afternoon until it was too dark to see, then he settled down on the wet grass, panting heavily, and finally, *finally*, enjoyed a bit of silence.

Silence didn't feel so heavy when he was outdoors, when he still could hear the wind and the ocean waves at the bottom of the cliffs. With the clouds cleared, Harry could see stars. It was like being back at Hogwarts, stars stretching across the sky in a way that made him feel breathless.

He couldn't say how long he stayed out there. Time stopped mattering so much. His breaths slowed and his body grew numb.

Only Malfoy's sharp voice pulled him out of the meditative state he'd entered.

"Potter," Malfoy said. Harry didn't bother turning around.

"What, Malfoy?" he responded.

"What are you doing?" Malfoy asked. He sounded irritated, his voice taking on a shrill quality that Harry had never heard before.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Harry muttered under his breath.

Malfoy made a shuffling noise, almost like he'd stomped his foot in anger. Harry didn't know why he was out there. He didn't think he'd seen Malfoy outside at all since he'd moved into the manor. For a moment, he thought Malfoy had left. He nearly jumped out of his skin when something dropped next to him.

“What—”

“It’s freezing out here,” Malfoy said angrily. He dropped something else. “The least you could do is not die of exposure.”

Malfoy’s footsteps were abrasively loud as he stomped back to the house. Harry turned back just in time to see him open the front door.

Harry was confused. *What had that been about?* He glanced at the things Malfoy had dropped. He found a small bundle of three muffins, all from breakfast that morning, and beneath them was a wool blanket with noticeable warming charms weaved into it. He could feel the heat of them without even touching the blanket.

He didn’t know what to make of the items, and though he couldn’t find some nefarious reason Malfoy would bring them out to him, he still felt annoyed. Malfoy was obviously being his normal, entitled self. Harry just wasn’t sure how exactly. If he was honest, he’d expected Malfoy to be more of a pest when he found out they’d be living together. He wished he could say he was pleasantly surprised, but somehow Malfoy’s lack of action just made him more keyed up.

He kept running over everything Malfoy had said or done since Regulus left. There wasn’t much to think about, but Harry managed to stretch it out, reevaluating everything from every angle. He was barely paying attention to it, obsessing over Malfoy was very comfortable for him.

All he knew was that by the time he went inside hours, he was wrapped tightly in the blanket and he’d eaten all three muffins. More than he’d eaten in days.

the hermit part II.

“So, you two don’t talk about *anything*?”

“Nothing beyond classes.”

“That’s weird.”

“How is that weird?”

“Well, I just mean you spend all this time with him...”

“It’s not like we’re friends.”

“You’re not friends?” Harry raised his eyebrows imperiously. Hermione glared up at him.

“Please,” she said dismissively, rolling her eyes. “It’s Malfoy.”

Harry laughed helplessly, something loosening in his shoulders. After a moment she joined him, chuckling under her breath like even she couldn’t believe she’d just said that. “What did you expect us to be talking about anyway?”

Harry shrugged awkwardly, avoiding her inquisitive gaze. “I keep running into him,” he said vaguely.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Harry sighed quietly, resigning himself to letting her see a piece of him he’d been keeping hidden. “At night, when I can’t sleep, I’ve been exploring,” he mumbled, a little chagrin to admit it out loud.

“You haven’t been sleeping again?” Hermione was always too observant.

“Just some nights,” Harry lied.

“Harry—” It was always obvious when she didn’t believe him.

“It’s not a big deal,” he replied.

“You need to talk to Sirius and Professor Lupin about this,” Hermione said warningly.

“You don’t have to call him professor,” Harry replied.

“He’s my professor.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Anyway, what were saying about running into Malfoy?”

“Okay, so last night,” Harry said, eager to move on from the topic of his insomnia, “I was trying to go by the ballroom. I thought flying might calm me enough to sleep, but when I was walking around a corner — It was after midnight, Hermione! — I ran straight into Malfoy!”

“What was he doing out there?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I was asking you,” Harry said helplessly. He threw himself back in his chair. Hermione looked curious and a bit confused, staring up at him from where she sat on the floor.

“What ballroom are you referring to?”

“I’ll show you later,” Harry replied, waving her off. “But it was weird! Not just cause he was out there, but he seemed surprised to run into me! Like he had no idea I was there!”

“I mean, it sounds like he wasn’t planning to run into you.”

“But why else would he be out there if not to stalk me?”

“Why would he be stalking you? There are only five of us here.”

“I don’t know! That’s why I was asking,” Harry said again.

“I have no idea,” Hermione replied.

“Yeah, I know that now. So why do you think he’s out there? Do you think he’s following me?”

Hermione raised one of her eyebrows. “I doubt he’s following you.”

Harry hummed dismissively. Something was going on with Malfoy. He just didn’t know what it was. After a moment of silence, Hermione spoke again.

“Can we talk about my thing now?”

“Yes, fine,” Harry said.

Hermione slapped her hands against the tops of her thighs excitedly; she was wearing a thick pair of pajamas that made her look like a glowing orange Christmas ornament. They’d taken to spending the hours after dinner lounging around Hermione’s bedroom. She had a fireplace that she always kept lit in the evenings with a couple of overstuffed chairs that sat in front of it. It was almost like being back in the Gryffindor Common Room.

They usually ate dinner all together, Malfoy included, but Malfoy was always quick to hurry back to his bedroom. Remus was often too tired to stay up past dinner time, he’d dozed off at the dining room table more than once, and Sirius usually followed him up to bed, leaving Harry and Hermione on their own. Harry didn’t mind, he spent a lot of his time during the day with either Sirius or Remus, it was nice to have time with just his friend.

“What do you think this means?” Hermione asked, shoving a book into his hands. He flipped it closed for a second to see the book’s title. It was the book of children’s stories that Dumbledore had left Hermione in his will. He flipped back to the page she was pointing at.

“The story?” he asked, reading the title ‘*The Tale of the Three Brothers.*’

“No,” Hermione said, then tapped her finger on the top of the page. “This. It’s hand-drawn, and it doesn’t appear anywhere else in the book.”

Harry squinted his eyes, inspecting the symbol. He’d never seen anything like it. He looked up at her questioningly, but she was waiting attentively as if she thought he might actually be helpful.

“You’re the one in ancient runes,” he said.

“It’s not a rune,” she said, shaking her head. She had her hair plaited into two braids, and they whipped violently from side to side.

“Oh,” Harry mumbled. “I don’t think I’ve ever—wait..” He glanced back at the symbol, and for a moment, it felt like he was experiencing déjà vu. It did look familiar, he just hadn’t realized it at first. “I have seen this before.”

“You have?” Hermione asked excitedly.

“Yes!” Harry practically yelled. “Xenophilius, Luna’s father, was wearing a necklace with this symbol on it. I noticed it at Bill and Fleur’s wedding.”

“Huh,” Hermione said, slumping slightly. She frowned like she was disappointed. Harry shouldn’t have been surprised, he knew how Hermione felt about the Quibbler.

“I don’t know what it means though,” Harry said regretfully.

“I wish I had noticed it, I could have asked him,” she mumbled, taking her book back from Harry’s lax hands.

“You would have listened to Xenophilius Lovegood?” he asked.

She pursed her lips to the side, he only knew what that expression meant because they’d been friends for so long. Hermione was trying her hardest not to laugh. She breathed sharply out of her nose.

“No, I suppose not,” she said once she’d gotten a grip on herself.

“You could ask Remus and Sirius. They probably know,” Harry suggested.

“Maybe.” She sounded uncertain.

“What’s stopping you?” he asked, sliding to the side in the chair so that he could toss his legs over the fluffy armrest.

“What if they don’t want me looking into this?” Hermione asked with another frown. “Dumbledore clearly left this for me for some reason but... I don’t know.” She looked away from the book and stared into the fire. Harry didn’t know how she managed to keep it burning all the time. House elves had always taken care of the fires at Hogwarts.

Harry pondered her words. He knew Sirius and Remus could be protective, maybe even overprotective at times, but they’d never tried to hide the world from him. If anyone was going to do that, it was Regulus, and even he had done his best to be honest when he could. Besides, he had no way of knowing what they talked to Sirius or Remus about. At least, Harry was pretty sure Sirius and Remus wouldn’t tattle on him to Regulus.

“Maybe just ask them about the symbol but don’t mention where you saw it.”

“What do I say if they ask where I found it?” Hermione said, picking at a stray piece of thread on her pajama bottoms.

“Say you found it in one of the books in the library. I doubt they’ve checked them for drawings.”

Hermione tilted her head thoughtfully. “And if they ask what book?”

“Just draw it in one of them,” Harry said, lightly exasperated.

Hermione gasped in outrage, whipping her braids around her head like a weapon as she turned back to look at him. “I’m not going to *write in a book*,” she hissed.

Harry half smiled, only barely stopping himself from rolling his eyes. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“No, Harry! You can’t!”

“I can!” he shouted. “And you can’t stop me!”

Hermione laughed even as she tried to stop him from lunging out of the over-stuffed chair, aiming to grab one of the books that lay open on the floor. Hermione was always in the middle of reading at least fifteen books. It was just her way. He managed to grab a book, but she snatched it right out of his hands.

“You can’t use any of these books, I’m reading them! Most of them are for our classes anyway” she said, turning to throw the book on her bed, well out of his reach. He tilted his head back to laugh.

“Fine, I guess I’ll get my own.” He took off running out of her room toward the library, the corridors were always lit by candles, they seemed to magically respond to anyone that moved past them. He could hear Hermione’s sock-covered feet padding against the floor as she chased him, both of them yelling in whispers as they rushed through the manor, bickering senselessly.

She didn’t fight him as he chose a book from the library at random, but he only realized why when he saw the smug look on her face.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a spare quill, would you?” he asked with another laugh. He couldn’t very well use a muggle pen to draw the symbol. Remus and Sirius were sure to catch on if he did. She scoffed jokingly and turned to walk primly back to her bedroom. All those antics for nothing, but his heart was pounding from running and all the laughter.

It made things easier, spending time with Hermione. They’d been friends for so many years that sometimes he forgot how much he enjoyed her company. She was like a sister he’d been raised alongside, both of them a little disconnected from the world they’d discovered at eleven. He found that his loneliness was easier to shoulder when he noticed Hermione carrying a similar load.

She didn’t talk about her parents, but Harry knew she missed them, just as he missed Regulus and James. They did talk about Ron quite a bit, both of them wondering what he might be doing back at Hogwarts. They always kept their conversations light, pretending that the world outside the manor’s walls wasn’t filled with darkness and danger.

“Do you think they’ll have Quidditch this year?” Harry asked later that night after following Hermione back to her room.

“I hope so,” Hermione said, “but I bet Ginny will be made captain.”

Harry chuckled. “That’ll drive Ron insane.” Hermione laughed quietly too. Everyone knew Ginny was the one bound for the professional league. Even Ron knew that. He’d confided in both of them that he was beyond proud of his sister, pleased that she could show them all up, but he had to keep up appearances.

He didn’t leave Hermione’s room till late that night, it was well after midnight, and Hermione was starting to nod off. He walked slowly back to his bedroom, considering if he should bother trying to sleep. He was distracted by the places he’d yet to explore so he didn’t notice right away, but when he was a few steps away from his bedroom door, he saw something sitting on the ground.

He bent down to pick it up, curious to find an expensive quill and a small pot of black ink, placed before his door like a secret present.

Harry slept that night, he thought the peculiar quill and ink would keep him up, but he ended up falling asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. It was unusual, but it didn’t last. The very next night, he was up and wandering again. He knew the sleeplessness was affecting him, but he couldn’t help it.

He, unfortunately, knew it was getting noticeable, too, because Sirius had quietly offered to brew him some Dreamless Sleep Potion more than once in the last few weeks. Harry had refused, at least for the time being. He didn’t like the idea of being so helpless at night. Besides, the sleepless nights didn’t feel so dire when he used his time wisely.

Exploring the manor definitely counted as using his time wisely.

He found it oddly comforting getting to know the manor, he’d even started mapping out some of the corridors. He could finally understand why his father, Sirius, and Remus had gone to

all the trouble of making the Marauder's Map. It made the manor feel like it belonged to him. However, since Halloween night, there was something unusual happening and though Harry didn't know what it was yet, he was intent on figuring it out.

Over the course of a few weeks, Harry had run into Malfoy no less than eight times. They never spoke very much, but with each meeting, it was like a time bomb forming between them. Tension he didn't understand kept building in the air, thick and suffocating.

One night he'd decided to explore the tiny doorway he'd noticed in the kitchen. He used his crow form so he could fit inside the tiny corridor but discovered several large rooms, including an old pantry and massive kitchen nestled against the walls of the manor. He was lucky his animagus form was small enough to fit in the corridors, he kept picturing Regulus trying to crawl through and quietly snickering imagining his bear form getting stuck. The snickers came out in the form of rattles and clicks from his beak. It was a little unnerving, he wasn't completely used to living a bird.

He concluded that the spaces must have been used by the house elves that used to run the manor. It seemed strange that the manor would have two kitchens, one for humans and one for elves, but he supposed that's just the way things were.

He spent a little over an hour exploring the rooms, wondering if this was where the house elves lived as well as worked, though he couldn't find any evidence of that, before hopping back down the narrow corridor into the kitchen.

Crows had better vision in the dark than humans did, so he could see most of the kitchen despite the lack of light. He spotted Malfoy's bright white hair almost immediately. He froze in place as Malfoy's eyes settled on him.

He was leaning against the kitchen counter, his arms crossed so tightly that it looked like his fingers were losing blood. He was wearing an extravagant robe, embroidered with the letters 'D.L.M.' on the chest. He looked like a character out of a novel, even Regulus had never worn anything so ridiculous and he was as close to a perfect pureblood as anyone.

Malfoy didn't know Harry was an animagus, Harry was pretty sure that was supposed to be a secret. It was illegal, after all, but Malfoy's bright eyes zeroed in on him like he knew exactly who he was looking at. A sneer crossed his sharp features making his chin look pointier than usual.

Harry crowed. He didn't intend to, the noise just escaped him. Malfoy huffed like Harry had called him a dirty word and stomped out of the kitchen angrily.

It was a bizarre interaction, so weird that he didn't even want to tell Hermione about it, and he'd been keeping her informed of all their weird meetings. Well, except for the night that Malfoy grabbed his arms. He didn't like how much that moment lingered in his head, and he worried that the moment he tried to tell Hermione about it, she would see something he didn't want her to see.

Not that there was anything to find there, he reminded himself.

It took Hermione over a week to bring up the odd symbol she'd found to Remus and Sirius. Harry had given her the book he'd drawn the symbol in and though she pretended to scold him, he noticed her tucking it under her arm. The book was all in Latin, so he hoped it was vague enough that Remus and Sirius wouldn't question it.

"I wanted to ask," Hermione said during dinner one evening, "have either of you seen this symbol before?" She turned the book away from her so that Sirius and Remus could look at it. Hermione always brought books to dinner, though she usually had the good graces to read them under the table.

Remus and Sirius both leaned forward, inspecting the symbol. They didn't look similar, but sometimes they moved like they were connected. More than once, Harry had caught them walking perfectly in sync with each other, even reaching with the same hand to scratch the same place on their bodies. It was a bit odd, but he wondered if that's just what people did when they got married.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia never moved like that, but maybe it was different for wizards. Or perhaps if it was two men rather than a man and a woman. He didn't know, and he felt like he was too old to ask questions like that now.

"Odd," Remus mumbled, he had a few crumbs caught in his mustache and without looking, Sirius reached up and brushed them free. "I know I've seen this before, but I can't remember where."

Sirius chewed on his bottom lip, his eyebrows furrowed. His beard was getting long, he hadn't been trimming it, and it was starting to make him look like he did when he first escaped Azkaban—although he was far less skinny now. Actually, since his wedding to Remus, Sirius had gotten a bit soft around the edges, his sharp bones fading behind well-fed flesh.

He raised his eyebrows like something had just occurred to him, but when he went to speak, Malfoy interrupted him.

"It's Grindelwald's symbol," Malfoy said. He was staring down at his half-eaten plate, but he must have glanced at the symbol when none of them were paying attention.

"That's right," Remus said, only sounding a little surprised. "I'd forgotten."

"Where did you find this book?" Sirius asked. He aimed the question at Harry, though Harry didn't understand why.

"In the library," Hermione said primly.

Sirius and Remus eyed each other, something unspoken passing between them, then Remus looked back at Hermione and raised his eyebrow questioningly. Hermione didn't even last thirty seconds before she broke.

"It was drawn in the book Dumbledore left to me," Hermione said, rushing the confession out in a panic.

“And you drew it in a book about ancient sex magic?” Sirius asked.

Hermione elbowed Harry hard in the side. “Harry,” she hissed admonishingly.

“What?” Harry hissed back. “I don’t read Latin!”

Sirius laughed so hard that his face turned red.

“Why didn’t you show us the book Dumbledore left?” Remus asked, barely containing his own laughter.

Hermione shrugged uncomfortably. Harry felt bad, drawing it in another book was his idea after all. “We just weren’t sure if you’d want us looking into this,” he said.

Sirius looked a bit confused, but Remus nodded. “I see,” Remus said. “What book did Dumbledore leave for you? I remember Regulus mentioning it.”

“*The Tales of Beedle the Bard*,” Hermione said.

“The children’s book?” Sirius asked. Hermione nodded.

“That *is* odd,” Remus said. “Why would Grindelwald’s symbol appear in a book of stories for children?”

“That’s what I was trying to figure out,” Hermione said.

“What did he leave you?” Sirius asked Harry.

“The Snitch I caught during my first game at Hogwarts.”

“Huh,” Sirius said, he and Remus shared another look.

“I don’t think it means anything,” Harry said. “I mean, there weren’t any symbols drawn on it or anything.”

Sirius frowned slightly. “They have flesh memories.”

“I know, I thought something would happen when he first touched it, but nothing did,” Hermione said quickly.

“What’s that mean, flesh memories?”

“It means it responds to first hands that touched it, it should have recognized you when you touched it,” Remus said.

Harry pulled the Snitch out of his pocket, he’d taken to keeping it on him at all times. It was a good distraction. He twisted it around, inspecting it, but it just looked like a normal Snitch.

Malfoy made a small, disgruntled noise.

“What?” Harry asked, harsher than was probably necessary.

Malfoy glanced up at him with a judgmental look on his face. “You didn’t catch the Snitch with your hand,” he said dryly.

Harry was confused, but as Malfoy’s meaning settled in, he felt his cheeks grow red with embarrassment.

“Oh, that’s right,” Harry mumbled. He glanced around the table to find Hermione, Sirius, and Remus all watching him expectantly. “Right,” he said again, then placed the Snitch against his mouth.

The memory of nearly choking on the Snitch during his first game wasn’t exactly a pleasant one, but he did a good enough job avoiding thoughts of it. He pulled the Snitch away and stared at it intently. At first, he thought nothing was going to happen, and he was seconds away from sneering unkindly at Malfoy at having proved him wrong with a small etching appeared.

“Oh,” he breathed.

“What is it?” Hermione asked eagerly. He tipped his hand to the side to give her a look. “Oh!”

“Well, don’t keep us waiting,” Sirius said impatiently.

“It’s a snake,” Harry said, holding the Snitch out to Sirius and Remus. The snake was tiny and curled around itself like it was taking a nap, etched right under one of the Snitch’s wings. Harry glanced away from it, he didn’t know what it meant, this snake just presented more questions than answers.

His eyes settled on Malfoy, who was watching him with a smug, superior expression. He looked so much like his old self, the one Harry knew frighteningly well, that for a moment, Harry couldn’t look away. He only noticed his mouth was hanging open when Sirius coughed pointedly, and Harry’s jaw snapped shut. He looked at Sirius, his face burning, and watched out of the corner of his eye as Malfoy left the dining room, abandoning his dinner.

Thoughts of the mysterious snake haunted Harry for the days and nights after he discovered it. He often found himself laying in bed for many hours staring up at the Snitch as it floated above his head as if it might whisper its secrets to him if he waited long enough.

He was starting to go a bit mad over it, actually, and Hermione’s obsessive research over Grindelwald and the meaning of snakes wasn’t helping. He could tell that Sirius and Remus were trying to figure it out as well, but they weren’t sharing anything with Harry and Hermione yet.

A week into December, Harry decided to explore one of the areas of the manor he’d been avoiding: the cellar. He felt restless and tired, and he needed something exciting to distract him. The cellar was perfect, it was a bit too creepy at first for Harry to explore it before. He wasn’t afraid exactly, but the first time he’d opened the cellar doors, he’d known there was something dark in there, and he hadn’t felt ready to face it.

He used his frustration to propel him out of bed and toward the cellar, his wand gripped tightly in his hand. The cellar was pitch black the moment he descended the stairs, all light from the floor above swallowed up like a magical shield existed between the two floors. He was wearing a cloak, and he pulled it tightly around himself when the cellar air proved chillier than expected.

The cellar turned out to be a long labyrinth of dark corridors that must have spanned the entire length of the manor. The walls were built of ancient stones embedded with magic, he could feel it seeping off of them. He kept a *lumos* lit at the tip of his wand, but it barely helped in the drenched darkness.

He hadn't gone far, only walked straight ahead, making note of all the turnoffs from the main hallway, but he could already sense himself getting lost. If someone was locked down here, they could go years without being found.

He turned left at one of the corridors, keeping a hand against the wall so he could track his way back. His hand shook slightly, a chill running up his spine. He took another left after a while and found himself faced with a short corridor that ended in a thick black door, the wood damaged from years of water dripping from the ceiling.

Harry reached forward to open it, curiosity and dread warring for dominance as his hand closed on the iron door handle. He turned it, struck by the harsh creaking sound it made, and gave the door a shove. It swung open on its ancient hinges right as a noise sounded behind him.

He nearly fell to the ground as he spun to look for the cause of the sound, then shouted when he came face to face with Malfoy. It only took a second for rage to overtake him.

"What do you think you're doing?!" he shouted.

Malfoy looked confused, his eyes glazed over like he was in a trance. Harry shoved him before he could stop himself, his hands connecting with Malfoy's muscular chest just long enough to send Malfoy careening backward. Malfoy stumbled and fell to the ground, crying out in pain.

"What was that for?" he asked unhappily.

"Why'd you sneak up on me?" Harry snapped.

"I didn't—" Malfoy looked around as he spoke, his words choking off as he took in his surroundings. "I didn't mean to. Where are we?"

"What do you mean where are we? You're the one that followed me down here," Harry said harshly.

Malfoy glared up at him and then pushed himself fluidly to his feet. Honestly, no one should look that graceful climbing up from the floor.

“You shouldn’t be down here,” Malfoy said, taking two menacing steps forward. Harry tilted his chin up, annoyed that Malfoy had several inches on him.

“Why not?” Harry asked.

“Because it’s danger—” Malfoy’s eyes flickered behind Harry for a second. Whatever he saw made the blood drain from his already pale face. “Mother?”

“What?” Harry said.

Malfoy shoved him to the side, his arms strong yet deceptively gentle as they moved him out of the way, then he stumbled forward and fell to his knees.

“What?” Harry asked again, pointing his wand toward Malfoy to get a better look at what he was looking at. Over Malfoy’s shoulder, Harry caught sight of Narcissa Malfoy, her face sallow and deathly still, her eyes wide and unseeing. She was dead, but how? How had she died? How had she gotten here?

“Mum,” Malfoy whispered, his voice panicked, his breathing stuttered. “No, no, no, no.”

“Malfoy,” Harry said. This must be a trap, he thought. Malfoy didn't respond to him, he sounded like he was hyperventilating. It was as if his worst fear at materialized right in front of him. “Oh,” Harry breathed, shifting his wand slightly. “Riddikulus,” he whispered.

Narcissa transformed into a small mound filled with multicolored flowers. It wasn’t exactly funny, but it was enough to distract Malfoy from what he was seeing.

“Mum?” he whispered, his voice catching.

“Come on,” Harry said, uninterested in sticking around and waiting for the Boggart to turn into something else. He grabbed Malfoy under the arm and hauled him to his feet. Malfoy went willingly, to Harry’s surprise, and allowed himself to be pulled back down the long corridors until they exited the cellar.

He was still breathing weirdly by the time they made it up the stairs.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked awkwardly. Malfoy turned his dazed, red-rimmed eyes toward him, and for a moment, he wasn’t Malfoy, he was just another scared kid worried about his family. He was just like Harry.

A second later, the sneer was back, and Malfoy was all but running away, shoving Harry roughly out of the way as he went. Harry watched him go, still struck by the piece of Malfoy he’d just seen.

the sun.

Harry tried not to think about Malfoy. He really, really tried.

But it wasn't easy. Memories of Malfoy calling out for his mother, his voice breaking along with his heart, kept invading into Harry's thoughts unwarranted. It was like he couldn't escape as if any free moment, any moment where he wasn't purposefully thinking about something else, memories of Malfoy would swoop in to fill the space.

He didn't see him for seven days after that night in the cellar. He didn't visit the cellar again either. He wanted to, he was dead curious about what else was down there. It was like no one had bothered to clear it out. James likely ran out of time before he was able to fully explore it and it had probably been decades since anyone had traversed the labyrinth.

Memories of Malfoy stumbling up behind him, his eyes glazed over, kept him from venturing back there. He wasn't sure why, but something about the way Malfoy had looked and acted set his teeth on edge, it made him nervous, and he didn't want a repeat of that night. Especially the part with Malfoy sobbing on his knees.

Harry hated Malfoy. Obviously. But he didn't want to watch him *cry*. That would be weird. And cruel.

It was still odd that he was missing. Harry couldn't nail down why exactly, but he found his nights were a little emptier when he wasn't constantly running into Malfoy. Not that he enjoyed seeing that prat, it had just become a part of his routine.

"Malfoy hasn't been in class in days," Hermione said one afternoon. It must have been odd for her to have classes one-on-one with Remus and Sirius.

"Yeah, I've noticed," Harry mumbled back.

"Have you?" Hermione raised one eyebrow questioningly. She always looked like McGonagall when she did that. Not that Harry would ever say that to her, he could just imagine the smug look she would give him if he did.

"Yes," he hissed. "There are only three of us, it's easy to notice when one of us is missing."

Hermione hummed quietly, then said, "You haven't seen him, have you? On your late-night walks."

"No, Hermione, I haven't seen him. Not in a while."

"A while?"

"A few days," Harry said with a dismissive shrug.

Hermione hummed again.

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“Do you think we should check on him?”

“I’m sure Sirius or Remus is doing it,” Harry said quickly. Hermione gave him a stern look. He groaned. “Fine.”

He still gave it a few days, he wasn’t about to run to Malfoy’s front door just because Hermione asked him to. Finally, when her pointed looks got to be too much, he dragged himself to Malfoy’s door. He paused before knocking, waiting, hoping that maybe he would change his own mind.

When it didn’t seem like any change was coming, he sighed and gave in, rapping his knuckles against the solid wood in quick succession. He waited for a moment with bated breath and wondered if Malfoy wouldn’t bother answering. He might choose to ignore Harry completely. That was fine. Harry didn’t really care what he was—

The door swung open.

“Oh,” Malfoy said, disappointment so obvious in his voice that Harry felt instantly annoyed, “it’s you.”

“Yes, it’s me,” Harry grumbled. He stared up at Malfoy’s pale face. Harry had expected him to look sick or excessively thin or something, but he looked completely fine. He was his usual shiny self, his blonde hair perfectly combed, his skin clear and bright. He was dressed in black slacks and a pale green sweater that made his eyes look even lighter. The room around him was similar to Harry’s, but it was so clean that it looked like a hospital. Everything was perfectly organized, as if Malfoy had been secretly sleeping somewhere else.

“Well?” Malfoy asked. He was gripping the door so tightly that his knuckles were turning white. Harry forgot that he was the one to knock.

“What’s wrong with you?” Harry blurted out. Malfoy looked momentarily shocked, a split second of emotion, then went to slam the door. Harry stopped it with a reflexive hand, shooting out just in time.

“Let go,” Malfoy snapped.

“No,” Harry snapped back.

“Boys,” Remus said making them both jump. Malfoy stepped back from the door, putting space between them. Harry hadn’t noticed how close they were standing. “Draco, do you still want to review what we went over today?”

Malfoy cleared his throat. He eyed Remus nervously but nodded. “Yes, come in, please.” He was stupidly polite, it grated on Harry. He acted like such a knob when it was just the two of them or just Harry’s friends, but then Remus came around and it was all good manners.

“Harry? Were you planning on joining us?” Remus asked kindly. His steady gaze made Harry feel overly visible like Remus was seeing something Harry didn’t want him to see.

“He’s not,” Malfoy answered before Harry could open his mouth. “He was just leaving.”

“You don’t know what I was about to do,” Harry snarled. He wasn’t Malfoy, he couldn’t just act proper in front of an adult. He knew he had a problem with his impulse control, but it hadn’t ever been more obvious than when he took a large step toward Malfoy as if he was going to brawl him like a muggle.

“Harry?” Remus asked, only sounding a little shocked. Malfoy didn’t even look afraid, he looked superior, a tiny smirk on his face, so faint that Harry was sure Remus wouldn’t catch it. No, that smirk was just for Harry.

“Why have you been missing classes?” Harry asked, only because Hermione asked him to. Not for any other reason. It didn’t matter to him.

“Malfoy has been—”

“It’s not your business, Potter. I would ask that you respect my space,” Malfoy said. He sounded like someone working in an office. Why did he talk like that?

Remus looked momentarily confused, his eyes darting between them, before understanding settled over his face. “Harry, would you mind—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going,” Harry said, finally admitting defeat. He turned and stomped away rapidly, hyperaware of the eyes glued to his back. He knew he was being rude to Remus, he would have to apologize later, but he didn’t care enough to do it right then.

He went in search of Hermione, but when he realized she was in the library studying, he left her to her books. It wasn’t fun ranting to her if she was obviously itching to get back to her classwork. He was about to head outside, the storm that had been raging for a solid three days be damned, when he found Sirius in the kitchen.

He was humming quietly, moving around the counters with unfair grace, throwing ingredients in boiling pots and flicking his wand to put the kettle on in one elegant movement. It was so easy to forget where Sirius came from, the childhood he’d lived, the one he never spoke about, but when he didn’t think he was being watched, he was so similar to Regulus and Malfoy.

When he turned again he spotted Harry in the doorway and his face brightened.

“Harry,” he greeted, his grin so wide that it looked like Padfoot was trying to stretch through his skin.

“Hey,” Harry said despondently.

“What’s wrong?” Sirius asked, tilting his head like a puppy. He waltzed forward and put a comforting arm around Harry’s shoulders.

“Nothing,” Harry mumbled. Sirius gave him a disbelieving look, pushing another sigh out of Harry’s lips. “It’s Malfoy.”

“Oh, I see. You’re finally ready to talk about that, are you?” Sirius asked knowingly.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked. He didn’t like the smug undertone to Sirius’s words.

“You and Malfoy.”

“There is no me and *Malfoy*,” Harry disagreed. “He’s just acting like a bellend.”

“Is he?” Sirius asked.

“Yes! Why aren’t you on my side?” Harry whined. Sirius tipped his head back to laugh.

“I am on your side. I’m always on your side. Surely, you know that.”

Harry huffed angrily. “No one else is bothered by him. You all just accepted his presence here. It’s weird! It’s weird that we live with him.”

“You live with him most of the year, don’t you? At Hogwarts?”

“That’s not the same thing, and you know it,” Harry seethed.

“No, I suppose it isn’t, but it’s not that different. You only have to see him in classes, right? Hermione says you don’t study with them.”

“You’re talking to Hermione about me?”

“I talk to everyone about you,” Sirius said, beaming with pride. “Hermione, Remus, James, Regulus—”

“Malfoy?”

“Well, no, you got me there. I don’t talk to Draco about you.”

“Why do you call him Draco?” Harry asked quickly, his irritation spinning in circles. He was hoping it would dissipate but it didn’t seem to be going anywhere. Sirius considered his question carefully, moving his fingers like he was practicing the piano against Harry’s shoulder.

“I guess,” Sirius said, “because I knew Lucius well before I knew Draco, and I always called him Malfoy so it seems weird to repeat it.”

“I never thought about that,” Harry conceded. “What is Lucius like?”

Sirius rolled his eyes, groaning dramatically. “He’s—what’s the word you just used? He’s a bellend.”

Harry snickered, Sirius’s eyes glittered. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“It’s true,” Sirius said. “You’ve met the man. He’s a dick.”

For a split second, Harry's thoughts drifted to the graveyard, to the torture curse running through his veins all while Lucius's awful laugh narrated the torment. Sirius must have felt him tense up, but he didn't comment on it. He just changed the subject.

"I always thought Narcissa was too good for him," he said.

"Yeah?" Harry asked quietly.

"Definitely," Sirius said with a nod. "Not that she and I got along. She always said I was a messy child and Cissy detested messes."

"That explains why Malfoy's bedroom looks like it hadn't been lived in."

"Yes, he got that from her. I thought he would be lazy, growing up with house elves will do that to you, but he's very particular."

"No kidding," Harry mumbled.

Sirius laughed again, this time low in his chest. Harry could feel it against him and found it comforting like a cat purring happily.

"So, what did you want to talk about if not Malfoy?" Sirius asked.

Harry bit his tongue hard enough to taste iron. "I didn't say I didn't want to talk about him, just not... him and I. Listen, forget it," he rushed to say.

"No, no," Sirius said, gripping him so tight that Harry couldn't make his desired escape. "Tell me. I won't laugh again."

Harry wanted to run anyway. It wasn't the laughter he worried about, not really. It was the judgment.

"He just—" He mashed his teeth together angrily. "He makes me so mad, sometimes I feel like I'm going to pull my hair out just from speaking to him. I don't understand how Hermione can spend time studying with him like it's nothing. It makes me feel..."

Sirius waited for him to continue. Harry stared pointedly down at his feet. "Makes you feel what?" Sirius asked softly.

Harry really didn't want to tell him. He really didn't. But this was Sirius. If anyone was going to listen to him without judging, surely it was Sirius.

"It makes me feel like there's something wrong with me. Like maybe Voldemort's soul did something to me, changed me, I don't know."

"Oh, Harry, no!" Sirius said. He finally dropped his arm from around Harry's shoulders but he didn't let him go. He pushed him into one of the chairs that sat around the tiny kitchen table. He knelt in front of him once Harry was sitting. "There is nothing wrong with you."

"Then why do I feel so angry?" Harry asked far too loudly.

Sirius frowned. "I don't think—" He sighed. "I think that Draco just brings out a side of you that you're not used to dealing with. Just because your feelings are big, doesn't mean they're wrong or bad." Harry chewed on his bottom lip as he listened, he felt like he could vibrate out of his skin. "If it makes you feel any better, I would argue that Draco is equally affected by you, so really, you're not alone."

"I'm not sure I know what that means," Harry confessed.

Sirius smiled indulgently. "No, I suppose you don't, but you will. Eventually."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed, but he could tell from Sirius's face that he wasn't going to get any more explanation than that.

"What are you making?" Harry asked, changing the subject woodenly.

Sirius smiled mischievously. "Moony's favorite!"

'Moony's favorite' turned out to be a Sunday roast made with so much salt that it was barely edible. Remus loved it though, he scarfed it down at dinner that night so quickly that he looked vaguely wolfish. Sirius looked so smitten watching Remus get gravy all over his mouth that Harry had to look away, a blush on his cheeks.

That night, he couldn't sleep again. He was tired though, that was the problem. His eyes were heavy and he kept feeling like he was moments from slipping into a peaceful slumber, but it never came. He would approach it but could never quite reach it. Sometime around three in the morning, he gave up and went wandering.

He didn't have any specific place in mind, it was too late to properly explore, but he needed to move. He was in the massive foyer when he heard footsteps behind him.

"Sirius?" he called, unsure of why that was who he expected to see. Truly, he should have realized it would be Malfoy and his sneering face that greeted him.

"Potter," Malfoy said.

"You're back," Harry breathed. One of Malfoy's blonde eyebrows raised imperiously and Harry's face felt hot. "I mean, what are you doing out here?"

"Are we going to do this every time?" Malfoy asked with a sigh.

"That depends, are you ever going to answer?" Harry said. He was aiming for fierceness, but that whining sound from earlier was back in his voice.

Malfoy looked suddenly very tired. He rubbed his eyes harshly, a completely, un-Malfoy movement. "I don't have an answer for you."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, taking one step toward him without meaning to.

"I don't know why I'm here."

“What?” Harry asked. “But why were you following me all those other nights?”

Malfoy looked up at him, something that Harry didn’t understand hung around his neck like a noose preparing to string him up if he said the wrong word. He looked world-weary and very old for a moment. He didn’t look as bright as he had earlier.

“I don’t know why I was following you,” Malfoy confessed.

Harry gasped, taking another step forward. “But you admit you were following me?”

Malfoy frowned. “Yes,” he said. Harry hadn’t been expecting it. He took another step forward. “I was following you.”

“But—” Harry just barely stopped himself from asking why again. Malfoy already said he didn’t know. It seemed ridiculous to ask again. He was too busy controlling his words, he didn’t notice his feet taking on a mind of their own. They took another two steps forward and suddenly he was nose to nose with Malfoy. Malfoy didn’t move an inch, only looked down at Harry with a dark seriousness that Harry had never seen him wear.

“Do you think you could try and sleep? This is really getting exhausting,” Malfoy said. He was so close that Harry could feel his breath against his cheek. He smelled like mint, bright and sharp.

“What?” Harry whispered.

“Just—” Malfoy lifted his hand like he was going to grab Harry again, Harry almost wanted him to. His hands shook as he dropped them. “Just try to get some sleep.”

Malfoy turned his back before Harry could think of responding, not that he had anything to say. His whole body felt like it was on fire all of a sudden, a desire to surge forward and tackle Malfoy to the ground rushed through him. It took everything in him to fight it. Malfoy was long gone before Harry felt normal enough to move again.

He did try to sleep that night but sleep never came. He still stayed in bed until the sun rose, pretending like he was resting.

Malfoy came back to classes the next day, and for a while, things went back to normal. Harry went back to his wandering and every night or so Malfoy would show up. Sometimes they would argue, but it seemed like something had settled between them. Harry didn’t understand how, but he felt the change regardless.

One night they just nodded at each other and Malfoy trailed after Harry for an hour or so before both of them went back to their rooms.

It was weird, and he definitely wasn’t planning to tell Sirius, Hermione, or Remus about it, but it was also fine and, most disturbingly, nice. It was peaceful.

Christmas landed on them like a crashing wave. Harry barely kept track of the days, he didn’t pay attention to the date and he didn’t care much about breaks now that he wasn’t at

Hogwarts. Classes were far less taxing and far more enjoyable so he didn't find himself counting down the days until holidays.

But he woke on Christmas morning to find a plate of cookies right at the foot of his bed and knew it was Christmas. He was just relieved he'd gotten some sleep. He stuffed two of the cookies in his mouth while he hurried downstairs to find Sirius and Remus making breakfast.

"Happy Christmas," he said cheerfully.

"Harry!" Sirius greeted. He always greeted Harry like that now, by just shouting his name like he hadn't seen him in eons. It always made Harry smile, it was good to feel wanted, to feel welcome.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," Remus said in his deep timbre. He put down the bowl he was whisking and pulled Harry into a warm hug when Harry got close enough. Sirius was in the process of turning sausage on the stove, but he smiled widely at the two of them. Harry squeezed Remus back, noting a distinct lack of pointy, sharp bones digging into his arms.

It was hard to tell given how tall Remus was, but he'd clearly gained weight since moving to the manor. He looked rested and younger than he had months ago.

"Is anyone else up yet?" Harry asked once he was let go of.

"Not yet," Sirius said. "But I'm sure it won't be long."

"Did you put cookies in everyone's room?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, that was my idea. My mum used to do that for me on Christmas when I was a kid."

"Really?" Harry asked. "What else did you do on Christmas?"

Remus smiled gently at him. They spent the morning recounting Remus's homey and comforting childhood Christmases. He hadn't had an easy childhood having been attacked by Fenrir Greyback at such a young age, but it was obvious that his parents loved him and had done everything they could to keep him happy.

Sirius didn't share any of his Christmas stories, but he looked at Remus with glittering, pleased eyes like he was absorbing Remus's memories as his own.

Hermione joined them a bit later, Malfoy walking tentatively into the kitchen only a few minutes after her. He looked a bit paler than usual, dark circles under his eyes. If Harry didn't know any better, he would think that Malfoy had been crying.

They ate at the tiny kitchen table, barely big enough for four people, but it was warm and safe and Harry found himself aching for James, Regulus, and the Weasleys. He hoped they were safe, all of them.

After breakfast, they moved into a giant living room that they barely used. It had two fireplaces, one on each side of the room, and both of them had been lit earlier that morning so

it was overly warm. They sat around on the old furniture while Sirius gave out a few gifts.

He gave Hermione some kind of a magical journal, one that expanded constantly.

“It’s a grimoire,” Sirius explained. “Every talent witch should have one.”

To Harry, he gave a set of Quidditch equipment, all brand new and indulgently expensive. “James and I bought that together during the summer,” Sirius explained.

He gave one small gift to Malfoy, but when Malfoy opened it, he just looked confused. Sirius opened his mouth to explain it before glancing around the room. “Let’s take a walk,” Sirius said gently. Malfoy didn’t look at any of them as he left, following Sirius out of the room.

Harry spent the rest of the day well-fed and filled with hot chocolate. He talked with Hermione and Remus for a long time, mostly about what they were learning in classes. None of them seemed keen to talk about the rest of the world, they were all missing someone and it wasn’t worth getting into, not when they couldn’t do anything but suffer. Sirius joined them later in the afternoon, but Malfoy never did come back.

Harry tried not to think about him being missing, about him sitting alone in that spotless room on Christmas day, but a few hours after sunset, Harry found himself knocking on Malfoy’s door.

A few long, empty seconds passed before the door opened. Malfoy poked his head around and this time, Harry was very sure that he’d been crying. His eyes were rimmed red and puffy. Harry tried to say something, but his mouth moved silently.

“Potter,” Malfoy said. “What do you want?” His voice broke slightly.

“Have you been crying?” Harry asked stupidly. He was lucky Malfoy didn’t slam the door in his face again.

“What. Do. You. Want?” Malfoy asked through gritted teeth.

“I just—” *In for a Knut, in for a Galleon*, he thought. “I was worried when you didn’t come back. It’s—it’s Christmas, no one should be alone on Christmas.”

Malfoy appraised him questioningly and then very slowly, he opened the door a bit more and stepped away. Harry almost didn’t take the invitation, there was no reason to enter into Malfoy’s *bedroom*. But of course, his feet always had a mind of their own and he was walking forward and closing the door behind him before he could stop himself.

“What did—what’s wrong?” Harry asked. Malfoy stood extremely still in front of him, watching him like a nervous animal for a second, then he drifted over to the couch in front of a dying fireplace.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Malfoy said. He pulled his knees against his chest after he sat down. He looked so much smaller than he usually did. “Aren’t you going to sit down?”

“Oh, right,” Harry mumbled awkwardly. There wasn’t really anywhere to sit beyond right next to Malfoy on the couch. There was a stack of blankets sitting in the only other available chair and it wasn’t like he was going to sit on his bed. He tried to put as much space between them as possible.

“Sirius gave me something,” Malfoy said after a beat of silence. “It belonged to my mother.”

“Narcissa?” Malfoy nodded. “What did he give you?” Malfoy pointed to the gift packaging sitting on the table in front of them. Harry leaned forward and gently pushed the paper out of the way revealing a white and gold tiara. It looked extravagant. It looked like real diamonds.

“A crown?” he asked.

Malfoy cleared his throat delicately. “Yes, apparently it was a gift from my grandmother to my mother when she was young. She used to wear it while she played. She left it at Grimmauld Place when she was a teenager. Sirius had been holding onto it, I guess.”

“Wow,” Harry said. “It looks real.”

“It is real,” Malfoy said simply. “Why wouldn’t it be real?”

“No, I mean it looks like real jewels,” Harry said, dragging his eyes away from the tiara.

“It is,” Malfoy said like Harry was the dumb one.

Harry’s mouth dropped open and it took a full ten seconds before he could speak normally again. “Only *your family* would play with real diamonds in childhood.” It was a bit of a mean thing to say, but Malfoy surprised him by huffing a laugh.

“It’s practically your family too.”

“Huh?” Harry asked.

“Regulus is basically your dad. He buys all your clothes and everything,” Malfoy said.

Harry scoffed. “Please, *please*, do not refer to it as ‘my family too.’”

“Why not?” Malfoy asked, his face twisting slightly. Harry threw his hands out.

“Because that would make us,” he gestured between them, “family and we—we—we—”

Malfoy didn’t look disgusted like Harry expected him to. Instead, a slow smirk started to stretch across his face, smug and self-important.

“We what, Potter?” Malfoy said, his voice dropping slightly. Harry shivered, feeling hunted. He looked away, he couldn’t look at Malfoy’s smirk anymore. He couldn’t keep staring at Malfoy’s mouth.

“Nothing,” Harry grumbled.

“No, no, you’re the one that wanted to talk,” Malfoy said in a sing-song voice. He sounded almost playful. Harry peaked another glance at him. Malfoy was still sitting on the far end of the couch, but he didn’t look as sad as he had when Harry first knocked on the door. When he was like this, laughing in a way that didn’t seem mean, he was almost handsome.

Harry was surprised by the thought, so surprised that he jumped to his feet startling both of them.

“Relax, I’m only joking,” Malfoy said with a defeated sigh. The good humor fell away from his face, that disappointed, sad look back in its place. Harry hated to see him look like that. He hated even more that he felt that way.

His thoughts started spinning in circles, chasing themselves so quickly that it made him dizzy. It was like a churning factory, going and going and going with no end in sight. Harry hated this feeling, this was the feeling that always kept him from sleep, that made him feel restless and trapped. He’d thought it was all Voldemort when he found out about the piece of his soul that lived in Harry, but now he worried it was just him. He was a ball of energy that had nowhere to go.

But here was Malfoy, and though Harry had been very successful at not thinking about it before, he still remembered the bathroom. He’d been beyond mortified about it before, horrified by what he’d done, but now he was thinking about the way his thoughts had gone quiet when Malfoy’s mouth touched his and he longed for that feeling.

“We could do it again,” Harry whispered. Malfoy’s head snapped toward him, his eyes widening comically.

“What did you just say?”

Harry tried to shrug, but only one of his shoulders would listen to him. “We could do it again,” he said, only a little louder.

Malfoy’s mouth dropped open. “Are you serious?”

Harry balled his hands up into fists to keep them from shaking. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

“I’m—I mean, no, but why?”

“Forget it!” Harry said, his courage dropping out from beneath him and leaving him in free fall. He moved like he was going to leave, but Malfoy stopped him with a strong grip on his arm.

“Don’t leave,” Malfoy said. His voice sounded different, it sounded odd, almost like two voices speaking at the same time, but one in a very quiet whisper. Harry looked at him nervously, immediately falling into his eyes. They were so close to each other, only a few inches apart. Their noses were almost touching. “Do you mean it?”

“Yes,” Harry confessed. His thoughts were so loud, screaming in his ears, and Malfoy’s lips were right there.

Malfoy searched his face. Whatever he found there must have been enough because a second later, his lips were pressing against Harry's, warm and soft. Harry's thoughts grew louder for a moment, reaching a pitch he thought would deafen him, and then all at once, they ceased to exist.

Silence and Malfoy.

Silence and the bright glowing feeling Malfoy seemed to exude.

Silence and warmth.

the strength.

Chapter Notes

cw: internalize homophobia. some sexual content between teenagers.

Okay, so he kissed Malfoy.

That wasn't great, but it could be forgiven. It was just a moment of weakness, right? Just a silly moment when he'd forgotten himself and needed a distraction.

Harry went to bed that night sure it would never happen again, but then by lunchtime the following day he was wondering what Malfoy was up to, what he was thinking about, what he might taste like.

Oh, Merlin, Harry thought. He was horrified with himself.

Do not think about the way Malfoy tastes, he scolded. Do not!

Only Boxing Day dragged and everyone else was too busy to keep him company and soon the sun was setting and Harry was getting that itch again.

He would just go knock on the door. That's all. If Malfoy didn't answer right away then Harry would go back to his room and lock himself in until the sun rose. Then tomorrow he would ask Sirius about that dreamless sleep he offered and never think about Malfoy again.

Malfoy answered the door after the first knock, Harry's hand was still raised.

"You're back," Malfoy said faintly. He didn't sound angry this time, which was bad. It was very, very bad. Harry was in trouble.

He surged forward, burying his hands in Malfoy's unreasonably soft and overgrown hair. Malfoy gasped, a small noise of pleasure leaving his lips right before Harry kissed him. He couldn't help it. He just couldn't stop himself. Not when Malfoy was so accessible, so close.

Besides, no one had to know. It could be a secret. Just between the two of them. He didn't think Malfoy would tell anyone. If anything, Malfoy seemed more embarrassed than he was. After they kissed that first night, Malfoy had all but pushed Harry out of the room, instructing him to go back to bed without talking to anyone.

Harry only listened because he was tired, not because it was Malfoy telling him to do it.

Malfoy's arms dropped around his waist, his hands pushing flat against his back as he pulled Harry in. He was so warm like he'd been sitting in front of the fire for hours before Harry

arrived. Harry dragged his tongue across Malfoy's closed lips, tasting the faint remains of Earl Grey tea.

He needed more, he just didn't know of what.

Luckily, Malfoy seemed well-versed in what Harry was after. He yanked them into his bedroom, slamming the door behind them and shoving Harry against it roughly. He cradled Harry's head with one hand as he did it, keeping Harry from slamming his skull back against the wood. Harry groaned though, he was anxious to feel a bit of pain, a little sting.

Maybe he would come back to himself then, maybe he wouldn't be acting so irrationally.

Malfoy pushed a leg between Harry's thighs and Harry promptly forgot what rational even meant.

By the time he went back to his room that night, Harry's lips were chapped from kissing for so long. They'd stayed pressed together so long that Harry started to worry that Malfoy might notice something that Harry didn't want to reveal. So he moved them to the couch, keeping anything but their lips and hands from touching each other.

It was embarrassing enough, running to Malfoy's room for a bit of kissing, without Malfoy noticing that Harry was...

He couldn't even think it. He was too mortified.

It was strange. He knew about his father and Regulus, and he spent so much time with Sirius and Remus who were free with their affection for each other, but every time that Harry went back to his room, he couldn't help feeling like there was something wrong with him. He shouldn't feel this way about another boy, right? He could just imagine what the Dursleys would say. They were always talking about things like this, using terms that Harry didn't understand.

He knew the Dursleys weren't right about anything else so there was no way they would be right about gay people, but he'd just never realized that he might be one. He'd had crushes on girls, right? He'd certainly had fantasies about girls. But the way Malfoy shoved him up against the door?

He shivered.

So he was definitely something. Maybe not gay exactly, but something. He tried not to let it haunt him. He ached to talk to Regulus about it. He even considered talking to Sirius or Remus about it, but he couldn't figure out a way to bring it up without mentioning who he was having gay thoughts about.

It wasn't like there was anyone else for him to discover with here.

Sirius would figure it out right away.

No, Harry couldn't risk it. He would just have to hope that the feelings for Malfoy went away, and with them all the feelings of wrongness that sat in his chest every night.

Classes started back up shortly after the New Year and Harry threw himself into studying. He would have to take his N.E.W.T.s eventually and he didn't want to accidentally fail them after having essentially private tutors teaching him for an entire year. Plus, the harder he worked in classes, the more tired he felt in the evening.

There was less wandering, far less, mostly because he knew that if he left his bedroom, he would end up back at Malfoy's door. Malfoy *always* opened the door.

Though, Harry noticed, he never did come to Harry's bedroom. He never sought Harry out, not once, and by the time January was almost over, Harry was starting to feel embarrassed about that.

Merlin, he was like a needy pet, always scampering back down the manor hallways looking for his master. It was humiliating.

"I'm going to stop visiting Malfoy," Harry told himself one night.

"I'm going to stop visiting Malfoy *tomorrow*," Harry corrected a few minutes later, creeping out of bed in search of Malfoy's bedroom door.

The next morning, Harry went down to breakfast with Hermione. They'd started meeting in the hallway between their bedrooms so they could walk to breakfast together. It made them both feel like they were back at Hogwarts, meeting up in the common room before heading down to breakfast in the Great Hall.

When they arrived, they found only Remus and Malfoy sitting at the table. Malfoy was slowly eating his food, he always ate slowly like he was cataloging every bite. Remus wasn't eating at all, he was bent over a plate of food, his fork held so tightly that it looked like it might break.

"Remus? Where's Sirius?" Harry asked.

Remus's eyebrows furrowed. "What?" he mumbled.

"Sirius? Is he not up yet?"

"Oh, sorry," Remus said, shaking his head. He looked much older all of a sudden, haggard like he hadn't slept in days. "Sirius had to go out for something. He should be back soon."

Harry frowned, sharing a look with Hermione. "What did he have to go out for?" Harry asked.

"He—"

"Please," Harry urged. "I have to know."

Remus gave him a long look. Now that Harry was paying attention, it was very obvious how worried Remus was. Harry wondered how long Sirius had been gone for. Remus's eyes drifted momentarily to Malfoy before he squeezed them closed.

“Regulus has been trying to get access to the Lestrangle Vault,” Remus said quietly. “Last night he told Sirius that he could go claim them. Sirius has gone to Gringotts to confer with the goblins.”

“The Lestrangle vault?” Malfoy asked, his voice unnaturally quiet. “Like my Aunt Bellatrix?”

Remus winced and nodded. Malfoy looked momentarily confused. Then something dawned on him.

“She died, you know. She’s been dead for months.”

“I’m aware,” Remus said.

Malfoy frowned deeply. “My mother said it was horrible. She said she was torn to shreds.”

Remus winced again.

“Was that you?” Malfoy asked. “Sirius?”

“It’s probably best if we don’t discuss—”

“I should have known! This whole time you’re acting like you’re keeping me safe meanwhile you were out there killing my family members.”

“She was going to kill us,” Remus responded tiredly. “Your Aunt, she wasn’t—”

“I know what she was like!” Malfoy yelled, standing up so abruptly that his chair went flying backward. Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen Malfoy really yell like this, yell in anger. “She was crazy!”

“Then why are you—”

“You should have told me!” He pointed an accusatory finger at Remus. “You or Sirius or Regulus! One of you should have told me. I deserved to know.”

Remus swallowed harshly. “Regulus didn’t want to put you at risk. The more secrets you know, the more danger you’re in.”

“I’ve already run away from the Dark Lord. I’ve already faked my death just to disobey him. How much worse can it get?”

“Much, much worse,” Remus said darkly.

Something happened between them, something crossing unspoken as Malfoy and Remus stared at each other. Harry didn’t understand it, but he could feel his hair standing on end. Hermione was barely breathing, her breaths coming in short gasps next to him.

“What happened to the Lestranges? If Sirius is going for the vault, then that means they’re...” Malfoy didn’t seem to be able to finish his sentence.

Remus gave him a pitying look. "They're likely dead."

All at once, Malfoy's tightly wound energy seemed to dissipate. He picked up his chair and sat into it heavily, staring down at his half-eaten breakfast.

"I'm sorry," Remus said.

"They weren't nice men," Malfoy whispered. "I'm not sad they're dead." He glanced up at Remus through his eyelashes, a look on his face that Harry knew disturbingly well. He'd seen it on himself in the mirror more than a dozen times. It was a look that said, "*Am I a bad person?*"

Remus relaxed slightly, dropping back into his chair like he'd been dropped from the sky. "I'm not surprised."

"You're not?" Malfoy asked, quirking an eyebrow up.

Remus looked away, his eyes dragging past Hermione and Harry briefly before falling to his lap. "Sirius mentioned some... incidents with them and Regulus when Regulus was a child. It sounds like they deserved to be in Azkaban."

"They shouldn't have escaped," Malfoy said gruffly. Harry had never heard him sound like that. It did something very odd to his stomach.

"No," Remus agreed. "They would have been safer inside."

"Did Regulus kill them?"

Remus paused for only a second before answering. "Yes, probably."

Malfoy ground his teeth together, his eyes never once leaving Remus's face. "Good," he said, and then he was gone. Gliding out the door with obnoxious grace.

The silence left in his wake seemed too still to break until Hermione's voice cut through the tension. "Did you really kill Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Remus glanced at her. "Sirius did."

"Wow," Hermione said.

Harry watched her process what Remus had said, he was surprised that she didn't seem horrified. "When will Sirius be back?"

"I don't know," Remus said. "Soon, I hope."

Harry hated seeing him like this, tired and achy like his bones were fighting him. Every now and then a muscle in his neck would twitch with pain. He hadn't realized how used to the new Remus and Sirius he'd gotten.

“I had some questions about Defense yesterday,” Harry said. “Do you think we could go over them this morning?”

Remus looked relieved for the first time since they entered the room. He smiled gratefully and nodded. Remus, Harry, and Hermione spent the day blowing off their typical class schedule and going over old material. It was oddly relaxing and Harry did find that he had more questions than he realized. It was nice to finally have someone knowledgeable in the topic around.

Around sunset, Sirius finally returned. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Remus move so quickly. He sprang up from his place on the couch and lunged at the other man before Harry could even think to move. Sirius caught him instantly, whispering quickly in Remus's ear while he slowly rubbed his back. Harry had to look away, spending time with Sirius and Remus together was getting treacherous for him because he kept picturing himself and Malfoy doing that.

It was frustrating.

“I think I'm going to go upstairs,” Hermione said, unsubtly gesturing toward the two men. Harry nodded in agreement, getting up to follow her. When they passed them, Harry overheard Remus saying something about Malfoy and the Lestranges. Harry tried not to think about it. He didn't know what Remus meant about them and Regulus and he wasn't sure that having more details would be helpful. He worried about Regulus enough without hearing about something horrible that happened to him as a child.

He and Hermione stayed up late that night and by the time Harry was leaving, Hermione was barely keeping her eyes open.

“I'm going to bed,” Harry told her, shaking her awake slightly in hopes that she wouldn't fall asleep in the chair in front of the fire.

“Okay,” she said tiredly, then gazed up at him. “What do you think Remus meant?” she asked.

“Huh?” Harry asked, the end of the word getting cut off by a yawn.

“About Regulus and the Lestranges,” Hermione said tiredly.

Harry shook his head. “I can't—I don't want to know.”

Hermione seemed to accept that and though Harry tried to get her to move, he could see her dozing off in the chair again as he was leaving. Though he was tired too, burnt from a long day of talking and studying, he found that sleep evaded him once again when he got into bed. He kept tossing and turning, imagining the Lestranges from their pictures in *The Daily Prophet* and Regulus at the age he was when he and Harry first met.

He just couldn't get the horror of the world outside their walls out of his head.

Suddenly, something hot began to burn his leg. He shouted in pain and surprise, throwing himself out of bed and shedding his pajama bottoms. He rubbed the skin on his thigh soothingly, staring at the clothing that now lay on the floor.

“What was that?” Harry whispered.

A knock at the door made him startle so badly that he yelped.

“Potter? Can I come in?” Malfoy’s voice floated underneath the door and circled around Harry’s already spinning head.

“Oh, yeah, one second!” he called frantically, rushing to put his pajamas back on. He couldn’t open the door naked from the waist down, that would be a bit too forward. He quickly searched the pockets once he picked up the bottoms, pulling out the blazing hot Snitch and tossing it onto his bed. He nearly tripped trying to the leg hole over his foot, but he managed to open the door fully clothed in no time.

“Are you all right?” Malfoy asked. “You look a bit flushed.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said with an awkward laugh. Malfoy had that slightly superior look again, it annoyed Harry how much he enjoyed it. “What’s going on?”

“I just—” A lost look crossed his face. “I’m not sure.”

Harry tilted his head questioningly. “Do you want to come in?”

“Sure,” Malfoy said.

His eyes danced around Harry’s room curiously. It wasn’t as clean as Malfoy’s was, Harry doubted any room in Black Manor was that organized, but it still wasn’t as bad as it could have been. He tried to pick up after himself.

“I thought it would be bigger,” Malfoy mumbled.

“What?” Harry gasped. Malfoy looked momentarily confused before breaking into breathy laughter.

“Your room. I thought it would be bigger than mine, but it looks like it's the same size.”

“Oh,” Harry said, laughing awkwardly. “No, it’s not that big.”

Malfoy shook his head, a soft smile on his lips. “Why were you shouting?”

“Sorry?” Harry asked.

“I heard shouting before I knocked on the door,” Malfoy said.

“Oh!” Harry yelped. “The Snitch.” He spun in place to look at it, it was still sitting on his bed where he’d thrown it. He bent closer to get a better look, unwilling to touch it if it was going to burn him.

“What are you doing?” Malfoy whispered. He’d bent over next to Harry, their faces inches apart from each other.

Harry cleared his throat, carefully keeping his eyes pinned on the Snitch. If he looked at Malfoy this close to him, he’d lose his focus. “It was in my pocket,” Harry said. “I wasn’t even messing with it, but it got really hot. I had to take my pajamas off just to remove it.”

Malfoy snorted. “Do you think it’s still hot?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, touch it and see,” Malfoy said. Harry scoffed.

“You touch it.”

“Fine,” Malfoy said, shrugging. He reached forward like he wasn’t phased by the potential pain. It was so unlike Malfoy to put himself in harm’s way. Harry wondered if this version of him had always existed, if this was the side of him that his friends got to see. He pressed the tip of his ring finger to the Snitch, holding it in place for a few long seconds. “It doesn’t feel hot to me.”

“Are you lying?” Harry asked, watching Malfoy pull his hand away.

“Why would I be lying?”

“To trick me into touching it again.”

“Yes, that would be a good joke,” Malfoy said with a solemn nod. “But unfortunately, no. I am not lying.”

Harry wasn’t sure he believed him, but he couldn’t just stay in purgatory all night, so he reached out with a purposefully steady hand and grabbed the Snitch. Malfoy was right, it wasn’t hot anymore. He lifted it, spinning it in his palm to inspect it.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said.

“Has the snake always glowed like that?” Malfoy asked. Harry hadn’t caught it on the first spin around, but he quickly realized that Malfoy was right. It was glowing like melted gold had been poured into the engraving.

“What does it mean though?” Harry asked.

Malfoy shrugged, placing his hands on his hips. “Not sure. Maybe try speaking to it.”

“To the Snitch?” Harry asked.

“No, you dunce. To the snake.” Harry blinked at him, vaguely confused. “In *Parseltongue*.”

“I haven’t tried it since—”

Malfoy lifted one eyebrow. "Since?"

"It's not important," Harry said quickly. "I'm not sure I can speak Parseltongue anymore. I can try it though."

Malfoy nodded and gestured for Harry to go ahead. Harry hated the way his cheeks burned hot at being put on the spot. He wasn't prepared, and he hadn't tried to speak Parseltongue since the ritual removed Voldemort's soul. It wasn't that he was overly attached to the gift, but it would be a bit disappointing if he'd lost it. He tried to focus on the snake before speaking.

"Open," he said finally. When nothing happened, he glanced at Malfoy.

"You said that in English," Malfoy said like Harry was the biggest idiot in the world.

"Yeah, that happens sometimes," Harry mumbled. "I'll try again." He looked back at the snake, this time trying to imagine it moving, spinning around itself, coming to life and acknowledging him. "*Open.*"

"Wow, it's been a long time since I've heard you speak Parseltongue." Malfoy sounded different than he usually did and Harry looked at him, he noticed that he was bright red all the way to the tips of his ears. Harry wanted to say something, he wanted to forget the Snitch and shove Malfoy to the ground, but then Malfoy pointed at the Snitch and said, "It's moving."

He was right, the snake was moving, although very, very slowly. It looked like it was trying to wake from a long sleep. It uncurled at a glacial pace and then with a driving purpose that confused Harry, it started working its way around the circumference of the Snitch.

"Why's it doing that?" Harry wondered.

"No idea," Malfoy replied. It left in its wake a small line like it was burning its way through the Snitch. Harry had to spin it to keep an eye on the snake, and when it made it back to its starting point, its head slipped inside the small, burnt line, the rest of its body following suit, vanishing from view.

Both of them waited in tense silence for something to happen.

"What was that about?" Harry asked just as the Snitch finally moved, opening like a jewelry box and revealing a small, black ball. For a moment Harry didn't want to touch it. What if it was dangerous or something? But then Malfoy nudged him and Harry found himself reaching out to pull it from the Snitch.

"What is it?" Malfoy asked. Both of them stared down at the object, uncertain.

"I have no idea."

"Do you think Remus or Sirius would know?"

"Maybe," Harry said. "I'm not going to ask them now." He placed the ball on his bedside table. "I'll take it to them tomorrow."

“Good idea,” Malfoy agreed. Once the ball and the broken Snitch were discarded, Malfoy and Harry stood next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, for a long moment. It had felt normal between them for a second, but now, that ridiculous tension was back in the air. It was so hard to escape it, impossible to ignore. He felt it every night that he’d snuck to Malfoy’s room.

Awkwardly and with great shame, he said, “Do you want to—”

“Yes,” Malfoy breathed, spinning Harry toward him and capturing his mouth with a searing kiss. Harry hadn’t kissed anyone else before—once Cedric had kissed him on the cheek, but he didn’t think that counted—but he was very sure that Malfoy was a great kisser. It annoyed him that that thought made him jealous.

Who else had Malfoy been kissing?

He didn’t think he wanted to know, but once he started thinking about it, it was very hard to let it go. He was still focused on it when Malfoy pushed him backward onto his bed. They’d never done this on a bed. *Never*. It was always on the couch or standing, but now Malfoy was climbing on top of him, one of his legs resting between Harry’s, holding himself up on both hands. His soft hair fell down around them and Harry couldn’t stop himself from burying his hands in it.

Malfoy groaned into Harry’s mouth, the noise sending vibrations up Harry’s spine.

“You’re hard,” Malfoy whispered against his lips. Harry froze, his entire body tensing up.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly. Malfoy pulled back just enough for them to see each other. He looked confused.

“Why are you sorry?”

“I-I don’t know,” Harry said.

Malfoy pursed his lips thoughtfully. “You don’t have to be sorry.” Then he lowered his hips down onto Harry’s and Harry abruptly realized that it wasn’t just him. He gasped in surprise, a feeling like panic squeezing him.

He’d never done *this*. He’d never *done this*! This was too much, it was too intense, he wanted to shove Malfoy off of him. Instead, he pulled him closer, digging his nails into the back of Malfoy’s neck and kissing him so roughly that their teeth clacked together. Malfoy made that groaning sound again, the one that Harry was sure he would hear later when he was alone.

It was like sitting down for a massive meal after months of starving, it was like indulging in anything he laid eyes on, it was like gorging himself to the point of sickness.

He grabbed Malfoy by the hip, pulling him roughly down, and with a surprised and overwhelmed gasp, both of them shook slightly. Somewhere, deep inside, Harry was sure he should be embarrassed about this. He was just starting to relax into his bed when Malfoy

shoved off of him with enough force to send him careening backward, stumbling once before his back slammed into the wall.

“Malfoy?” Harry yelled, sitting up rapidly. Malfoy was bent at the waist, his hands on his knees, his back shaking with the force of his pants. “What’s wrong?”

“Noth—I have—” He didn’t finish his sentence. He threw the door open and sprinted from the room without another word.

Harry tried to follow him only a few minutes later, but Malfoy didn’t open his door when Harry knocked. And when Harry’s worry got to be a bit too much and he tried to open it, he found the door firmly locked.

He spent the night examining the little black ball that Dumbledore had hidden inside the Snitch, but there was very little he could ascertain on his own. When he got up with the sun the next morning, not having slept a wink, he pocketed the Snitch and the ball, intending to ask Remus and Sirius once he saw them.

Only he didn't get the chance.

He was heading toward Hermione’s bedroom, planning to meet her there so they could head to breakfast together, but he found Sirius and Remus hovering in front of Malfoy’s door instead.

“Sirius?” Harry called. Sirius turned to look at him, his eyes bloodshot like he hadn’t slept either. Given the messy state of his hair, Harry thought he could guess what Sirius had spent his time doing.

“Harry,” Sirius greeted, lacking his usual grin. “You haven’t happened to see Draco yet this morning, have you?”

“Erm, no,” Harry said, panic dancing up his ribs. He shoved his fists into his pockets so that no one would see them shake. “Is something wrong? Is Malfoy okay?”

Remus’s head snapped around, his eyes—too golden for this time of the month, too feral—landing on Harry’s face. “Why would you ask it that way?” Remus asked gruffly.

“Remus,” Sirius said warningly, shooting Remus an unsteady look, but Remus didn’t even blink, he kept staring at Harry like he knew something.

“I don’t know, you both looked worried,” Harry said, only stumbling over his words a tiny bit.

“Harry, I need you to tell me—”

“Harry?” Hermione said, shuffling up from behind him, a curious look on her face.

“Remus, calm down,” Sirius said quietly, placing a hand between Remus’s shoulder blades, his eyebrows pulled together in a grimace. “It’s going to be okay.”

“We have to get this door open.”

“What’s going on?” Harry asked, perhaps a bit too loudly. His worry was taking over, quickly becoming overwhelming.

“We don’t know,” Sirius said, “but we need to get into Draco’s room. Did either of you see him last night?”

“No,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “He was upset yesterday morning though.”

“Upset by what?” Sirius asked. “The Lestranges?”

“That shouldn’t have caused this. I would have felt it if it did,” Remus said, his voice low like a growl.

“Could it happen to him while he was alone?”

“I have no idea,” Remus said. It almost sounded like he was in pain.

“But if no one saw him since I talked to him then—”

Harry cleared his throat, unaware that he was planning to speak until the words started spilling out. “I saw him last night.” Sirius, Remus, and Hermione all looked at him with varying levels of worry and accusation.

“Oh, no, Harry. You weren’t fighting again, were you?” Hermione asked worriedly.

Harry burned with shame and embarrassment, he begged the ground to open up and swallow him whole. “Erm, no. We weren’t fighting,” he said very quietly. The silence was deafening. For what felt like an eternity, no one spoke. No one even breathed.

It was Sirius who broke it. “Knew it,” he said with a smirk.

“What?” Harry squeaked. Remus shrugged.

“That would do it,” Remus said, aiming the words at Sirius.

“Right you are, Moony,” Sirius said, his usually cheerful attitude returning. “Harry, Hermione, why don’t you two head downstairs? I’ll be down in a second to make breakfast. Remus can help Draco.”

“Help him with what?” Hermione asked, but she was already turning away. Harry was anxious to follow her, anxious to get away from the looks both Sirius and Remus were wearing.

“Harry, you and I can talk later, okay?” Sirius called right before they turned the corner. Harry’s already tense body felt momentarily immobile with stress.

“What is he talking about?” Hermione whispered.

“Hermione, I really, *really* don’t want to talk about it.”

the name.

Chapter Notes

we're heading into 2025!! you guys ready to wrap this shit up?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Draco woke from a dead sleep with knowledge bearing down on his shoulders, so heavy that the ground felt as though it was made of sand, parting beneath his feet as he sank through the earth. When Pansy asked him the next day where he had been and what had happened to him, he wouldn't be able to answer her, but that night it all felt so clear, that knowledge held so deeply that it seemed as if it had always been there.

Warmth filled his limbs, curled around his fingers and toes, whispered secrets to his lungs and heart, and picked him up like a marionette hanging from delicate strings. The cold, damp earth of the forest called to him like a siren, a danger made of hairy, spindly legs and sharp, cruel pincers.

"Draco?" a voice called. Draco turned, something like himself wondering what was happening and something like a monster telling him to claw his way out.

"Who's there?" Draco responded. The corridor remained empty. After a moment, magic sizzled in the air briefly and Regulus appeared before him. He jumped, the magic burning against his raw skin.

"What are you doing out here?" Regulus asked. He hissed it like he had some authority to ask Draco such a question.

"I'm..." Draco began to answer. Why was he in the corridor? Where had he been headed? The knowledge faded like a forgotten dream, just barely out of reach. "I can't remember, I'm..."

Danger, the warmth whispered. *Forest, legs, damp, pincers, death*. His feet moved without him, turning away from the Regulus imposter and hurrying down the hallway. Draco could sense the wrongness in Regulus's words, he could taste the lies. He found reasons for it in the daytime. The Regulus imposter grabbed his arm roughly, his fingers were small but they felt like a man's.

"Where are you going?" Regulus asked. A snarl climbed up Draco's spine, he clamped his teeth together to keep it in as he ripped his arm out of Regulus's hand. "Draco, stop," Regulus whispered frantically. The warmth in his limbs turned to icy rage, and the snarl from earlier raced through his clamped teeth, spilling out like a hiss.

The noise shook him, his limbs felt like they were separate from his head. It was like he was possessed.

“I have to go,” he mumbled, hoping the Regulus imposter would understand. Regulus’s eyebrows crunched together in confusion. Draco looked away, hoping it would clear his head. “He... I think... something is wrong... I don’t know,” he said. He couldn’t remember. He couldn’t *remember*. Where was he going? Something was wrong? Danger, right? He couldn’t see it clearly anymore, which was wrong because if he couldn’t see it, he couldn’t help.

Nausea swept through him violently and he stumbled to his side, crashing into a hard, stone wall. The world spun around him as Regulus whispered, “All right, it’s okay. Let me take you up to the Hospital Wing.” Draco nodded shakily. He was sure Regulus was lying about his identity, but oddly enough, Draco still trusted him. He didn’t know why, but he wasn’t in a state to question it now.

As he was dragged through Hogwarts, he kept feeling that warmth fill him, that assuredness that he needed to be somewhere. His throat ached and his feet could barely walk in a steady line with the way he kept trying to turn away from the direction Regulus was taking him. When Madam Pomfrey began hitting him with the diagnostic charms, Draco tried to explain what was going on and why she needed to *stop doing that*. Magic hurt, it stung his skin like needles.

When she turned from him, he made to leave, but Madam Pomfrey wasn’t done with him yet. She grabbed him by the shoulders and forced a potion down his throat.

“Draco,” a voice hissed. Draco wished people would stop *hissing* at him. He’d had quite enough of that. “Draco.”

“What?” he mumbled.

“*Why* are you in the Hospital Wing?”

He blinked open his eyes groggily to find Pansy’s angry and suspicious eyes staring down at him. He’d known Pansy for most of his life so he knew that the anger and suspicion really just meant she was worried, but his head hurt and his eyes ached so he wasn’t interested in being snapped at by her.

“Go away,” he mumbled, turning his head in the other direction. Pansy just followed his view around the bed.

“Crabbe said he has no idea when you left the dorm. Why are you here?”

Draco groaned. “Please, Pansy.”

It bothered him then that Pansy wouldn’t let it go, even weeks later she was still bringing it up, but really he just didn’t want to think about it. He felt like he’d lost control of himself, and he didn’t want to think about it anymore.

He'd managed to forget about it for a while and when his mother asked how his second year was, he told her it was adequate and that beyond the whole mess with Father and the Board of Governors, it was an uneventful year. They didn't talk about the Chamber of Secrets, he knew from the moment he saw her at the train station that it would be a forbidden topic.

Summer went as it always did, though his father was far angrier than he was the year before and Draco spent a lot more time skirting around him, but it was unexciting. Until one morning when Draco went downstairs to find his parents looking pale white and unsteady at the breakfast table. He watched them quietly, waiting for one of them to explain, and when that explanation didn't seem forthcoming, he asked, "Has someone died?"

Both of them turned to look at him with such intensity that he nearly dropped his fork. That would have been bad manners.

"Why do you ask that?" his father asked sternly. Draco thought his father was much more fun before he started Hogwarts. He never remembered him being so serious back then. Now he almost never smiled.

"I don't know," Draco said quietly. Silence fell over the room like smog and Draco finished eating as quickly as he could. When he was alone in his bedroom shortly after eating, he called one of the elves to ask them what had happened. He would have asked Dobby, but *Potter* had freed him. Draco seethed over that for weeks.

A different elf, unfamiliar to Draco and shaking fearfully, brought him a copy of *The Daily Prophet* without a word, and when Draco's eyes settled on the front page, he felt nothing but confusion.

MASS MURDERER SIRIUS BLACK ESCAPED FROM AZKABAN

Regulus's father? Or the man he *claimed* was his father. Draco still didn't believe him, his mother had seemed scandalized to find out that Sirius Black would have fathered a child. He'd been in Azkaban for most of Draco's life. He didn't find it that odd, he had lots of family members in Azkaban, but now he'd broken out? Was that something they should be concerned about? His mother never seemed afraid of Sirius, not like she was of his Aunt Bella.

"Do you think Sirius Black will come here?" Draco asked his mother that night. She stared at him with a long, piercing look, unwavering and unblinking. Draco stared back in the same fashion. He'd come for answers and he'd learned from the best.

"No, I don't believe he will," his mother said finally. "But that doesn't mean you should go out looking for him. If you see him, you must tell me or your father immediately."

"Why? Is he dangerous?"

"You have obviously read the *Prophet*, he is a mass murderer," she said with a light sardonic quality to her voice.

“A mass murderer of *muggles*,” Draco said with an eye roll. Narcissa gave him a measured look.

“Azkaban can do terrible things to a person,” was all she said, turning back to a letter that sat open on her lap.

“Mother,” Draco said, aiming to draw her attention back. She merely lifted an eyebrow. “Do you think that Sirius will try and contact his son?”

“His what?” she asked. She didn’t sound worried, only disinterested.

“Regulus Black, my classmate,” Draco clarified. She finally glanced at him slowly. “You seemed surprised before,” he reminded her. Her eyebrow twitched. He might have overplayed his hand a bit with Regulus at school, he was almost worried, but only for a moment.

“I don’t believe my cousin ever had a child,” Narcissa said crisply.

“Not even in secret?” Draco asked pointedly. Narcissa smiled coldly, shaking her head delicately.

“No, Draco, not even in secret.”

“Why not?” Draco pushed. “I mean, how do you know?”

She stared him down again with a gaze that would have made a lesser man twitch. That meant she knew something though, Draco was sure of it. Finally, she said, “You mustn’t tell your father that I told you this.”

Draco very carefully didn’t smile, though his desire to shimmy his shoulders giddily was almost overpowering. He hurried forward and sat across from her. Narcissa smiled softly at him and leaned forward once Draco was seated, she always did that when she shared secrets with him.

“There was a lot of gossip about him while he was at school, and gossip within the family before he was disowned,” she whispered. “You see, many people, myself included, believed him to be homosexual.”

“Homosexual?” Draco asked. “Like gay?”

“Yes, Draco,” Narcissa said. “But you cannot repeat that.”

“Okay,” Draco agreed.

“She said that Sirius was *gay*,” Draco shared dramatically. He wasn’t known for keeping information to himself. His mother would understand if she could see how smug Regulus looked. What was with him? Not even caring that his supposed father was on the loose. Draco thought that was crazy.

He wondered if maybe Regulus was helping Sirius or had already spoken to him, maybe he'd helped him escape Azkaban, after all, it was supposed to be impossible to escape from the prison.

He thought about it for the rest of the summer, he planned to confront Regulus about it again on the train or perhaps taunt *Potter* about the fact that Sirius was still his legal godfather despite the fact that he'd turned them over to the Dark Lord. He didn't get the chance to bring either thing up though because their train was stopped by dementors searching for Sirius Black.

They'd only drifted past the compartment Draco and his friends were sitting in, but his fingers grew cold when they came near. His skin felt rubbed raw by the darkness that swirled in the air and that desire to snarl, hiss, and fight started gripping him so tightly that he thought he was about to make a fool of himself in front of his friends.

The dementor moved passed without opening the door and Draco thought he was safe, but then a few minutes later something happened. Goosebumps broke out across his body and his skin felt too tight all of a sudden.

"Draco, are you all right?" either Crabbe or Goyle said, Draco couldn't be sure which one. He shook his head and jumped to his feet, shoving out of the compartment and into the hallway right as the dementor leaned into a compartment at the end of the train car. He felt like his skull was going to break right through his skin, his knees shook and nearly collapsed beneath him. Something in him wanted to throw him forward, to toss himself at the dementor. Only a giant silver mist erupting from the compartment freed him from the compulsion.

He returned to his train car the moment the dementor vanished to the next train car but he felt wrong for a long time afterward.

"Can't believe Potter fainted," Goyle sneered. They talked about it for days, Draco thought it was ridiculous, but he worried about his own response. He hated feeling out of control.

Third year wasn't off to a great start, but Draco was making the most of it. He was a bit thrown by the addition of a new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, one that made his stomach flip over uncomfortably. He hated looking at the man, it made his skin crawl. He was positive it was disgust until Professor Lupin complimented him on getting an answer correct—he'd answered *ironically*—but Lupin gave him ten points for Slytherin and Draco's face burned all the way up to his ears.

He was just lucky his friends didn't notice. Or at least, Crabbe and Goyle didn't notice. Pansy may have noticed more than he wanted her to, but he always avoided her gaze when they went to class in hopes that she wouldn't confront him.

Everything felt so chaotic, especially after he was *attacked* by that stupid Hippogriff, but it all turned upside down when the dementors flocked into the Quidditch Pitch while Gryffindor was playing Hufflepuff and sent *Potter* careening toward the ground. Draco nearly threw himself out of the stands, his body lurching forward without his permission. Only Theo's tight grip on his arms stopped him. He wasn't even sure why Theo had done it, but when Draco turned to look at him, Theo was looking away.

All the professors and the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team followed *Potter's* floating body to the Hospital Wing and though Draco wanted to follow his friends back to the common room, he couldn't stop himself from trailing after the group, desperately trying to keep *Potter's* prone form in sight. He kept getting blocked by his group of fans and it was driving Draco mad.

"Harry's going to be fine," Regulus said a little while later, leaving the Hospital Wing to find Draco hovering unwillingly in the hallway.

"What?" Draco gasped, unnerved that he'd been spotted.

"He will be fine, the dementors just take a lot out of him, but he'll wake soon."

"I don't care," Draco said quickly.

"Right." Regulus dragged out the word disbelievingly. Draco wanted to claw his stupid eyes out. When Regulus turned away from him, intent on heading back to the Hospital Wing, words spilled unwarranted from his mouth.

"Did Black actually get into Gryffindor's common room?" He bit down hard on his tongue. It was happening too often to him, he kept losing control.

"No, he couldn't make it in without a password. He wouldn't be able to make it into our dorm room regardless."

Draco's eyes narrowed suspiciously. It didn't feel like a lie, but how could he be sure? "And you didn't let him in? You're not helping him?"

Regulus's eyes sharpened, he saw too much, he paid too much attention to Draco. It made Draco feel like a bird trying to escape a shrinking cage. "I thought you didn't even believe I was related to him."

"I don't!" Draco shouted then hissed, annoyed at himself. "I don't," he repeated. "I know you're not his son. But that doesn't mean you don't know him or have some connection to him."

"I'm not helping him. I would never do anything to put Harry in danger, including helping Sirius Black." There was so much solemn honesty in Regulus's voice, that Draco felt something recede from his spine. The moment that worry was gone, a worry he didn't even realize was attached to his body, he knew what was happening. He didn't know why or how, but he knew one thing for certain. Why he'd been so affected by the dementor attacking *Potter*, why he'd nearly thrown himself out of the Quidditch stands...

Potter's safety was somehow tied to Draco's life, and that was the worst news Draco had ever received.

"Fine, I believe you," he snapped, mostly to get Regulus away from him, before hurrying back to the common room. He locked himself in a bathroom on the way there and had

himself a little panic attack, just enough to make his clothes slick with sweat and his vision blur.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's okay," he told himself, whispering again and again until he felt well enough to keep heading to the dorm. He dashed from the lavatory just in time to slam right into Professor Lupin.

"Mr. Malfoy," he said, catching Draco with ease. "Are you all right?"

Draco made a noise embarrassingly similar to a squeak and jumped so violently that Professor Lupin was forced to grip down on his arms to keep a hold on him. His world tilted for a moment, he was unprepared to be touched by someone who made him feel like *that*.

"M fine," he mumbled, shook off Lupin's hands, and sprinted indelicately down the hallway.

He didn't tell anyone about his connection to *Potter* and he almost managed to forget as the year dragged on, especially once he went home for the Christmas Holiday and demanded answers from his mother. Not about *Potter*, he wasn't about to bring that up, but about a more pressing issue.

"Sirius Black keeps trying to break into Hogwarts. On Halloween, he tried to get into the Gryffindor Tower," he told her dramatically.

"I know, Draco," Narcissa responded with a delicate sigh.

"Do you think he's trying to get to Regulus?"

"To whom?"

"His son," Draco said suspiciously. Narcissa arched an eyebrow. "Unless you still think Regulus is *not* his son."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I only find it odd that Sirius would name his son after his brother."

"Why? Did they not get along?"

Narcissa hummed, looking away. "Sirius was a difficult child."

"Not Regulus?"

"No," Narcissa said, "he was always lovely." Draco couldn't be sure, but he thought her eyes were glistening slightly.

"What was he like?"

"He was a lot like you," Narcissa said proudly. "Maybe a bit quieter."

"What did he look like?"

Narcissa hummed. "Let me see," she said. "I may have a picture." She stood from the table, closing the book she was reading with one well-manicured finger, and started toward the library. Draco followed her eagerly. She so rarely wanted to share things about her family, she often said it was too painful, so many of her loved ones were either dead or lost to her.

Once in the library, she wove through the aisles carefully, heading toward the back west corner. They'd set up a small reading area for Draco there when he was only six, but Draco preferred to read while walking, he always had, so it sat unused for years. Behind the two leather chairs were four large, wooden bookshelves built straight into the wall, each of them decorated with ornate carvings of dragons.

Draco had never paid much attention to what books they'd placed there. There was one row of chapter books that were meant for him, but he'd never searched the other shelves. Narcissa lifted onto her toes when she approached one of the bookshelves and with a flicker of magic, summoned a large book from the very top shelf. It floated down to her like an obedient dog, landing delicately in her hand.

"Now, let's see," Narcissa said, sitting in one of the chairs and patting the other one twice. Draco jumped into it, bouncing twice before settling.

"What's that?" he asked.

"This is one of the family books," Narcissa said with great meaning. "We have them for the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, my family, and for the Malfoys. We left them in here in case you wanted to educate yourself about where you came from." She gave him a pointed look which he ignored. Why would he bother reading all these old books when he could just pester his mother with questions?

"Is there a picture of the old Regulus in there?"

"Yes," Narcissa said, "there should be pictures of both of them."

"Both? The new one too?"

"No, Regulus the first and Regulus the second, my cousin. The Regulus you go to school with won't have a picture included. It would have to be added by a family member and given where Sirius has been for most of his life, well..."

"Right," Draco said, leaning forward precariously to see the pictures she was flipping through. Most of them were paintings, small and magically charmed, all of his ancestors, tied together within a book. Gradually the small paintings turned to pictures, all black and white.

"This is me and my two sisters," Narcissa said, handing Draco a photograph of three young girls.

"I thought you only had one sister," Draco said.

Narcissa shook her head. "Andromeda betrayed us," she said. Her voice wasn't bitter like Draco expected it to be, but there was a hollow sadness there. She went back to searching

through the pictures as Draco inspected the one of his mother. She was easily differentiated from her two sisters, her hair was the same white blonde as it was now, laying flat to her head, a stark difference from the large curls both Bellatrix and Andromeda had. "Ah, here you go."

She handed him two more pictures and Draco immediately gasped. One of them was of two young boys, both dressed in extravagant wizard robes. The taller boy had hair down to his chin, an annoyed frown on his face as he glared at the camera. His eyes slid to the smaller boy, mischief overtaking his unhappiness as he reached out to mess with the smaller boy's hair.

The smaller boy knocked his brother's hands away, scowling slightly, though it couldn't hide the smile in his eyes. His eyes glimmered as he looked back at the camera, a broad smile on his lips.

It was Regulus. He had the exact same face as the boy Draco knew at school. He was a bit younger, maybe seven years old, but it was definitely him.

"Is this Sirius and Regulus?" Draco asked.

"It is," Narcissa said. "Before Hogwarts, they were always playing like that."

Draco pulled the next picture out, the other one that Narcissa had handed him. It was a photo of the Slytherin Quidditch team.

"That's Professor Slughorn," Narcissa said, pointing to the professor standing in the front row. "He was the Potions professor and the head of Slytherin House during our time at Hogwarts. He had several versions of the photo made so he could send them to all the families. This one is Regulus, he was the Slytherin Seeker, just like you."

Draco didn't need her to point him out, he could recognize Regulus by now. Though he didn't say anything about it to his mother, he knew with grave certainty that this wasn't the uncle of the boy he went to school with. No two people looked that similar, even in the same family. No, this was Regulus Black. The original.

He put the pictures back into his mother's waiting hand and spent the next hour asking questions about her childhood growing up with two sisters. After a while, she had to leave to meet a few of her friends. They had a Christmas party to plan after all. He stayed in the library for most of the afternoon, looking through all the pictures in the Black family book. There was a family tree in the front pages, a magical tree that breathed like wind was blowing through its branches. He spotted his mother and his father, he even saw his own name, but there was no branch peeling off from Sirius Black.

Regulus Black III did not exist.

Once satisfied, he eventually moved on to the one about the Malfoy family, curious to see if there were any pictures of his father when he was a child. The idea of it almost made him laugh. But once he started to search through the names of his ancestors, he began to feel unsettled. There was something peculiar about the names of one of the women who'd

married into the Malfoy family, a woman who was only a few generations back from Regulus. He slammed the book closed, placing it back up on the shelf with a bit of inelegant magic.

There was something to be said for learning too much on accident.

"I figured it out," Draco said, sitting across from Regulus in the library before Regulus could object. Regulus set his book down slowly, eyeing Draco with uncertainty. *Good*, Draco thought, *let him be scared of me*.

"Figured what out?"

"You're not his son," Draco replied confidently.

"So you said before," Regulus drawled. He sounded like Snape when he spoke like that.

"Yeah, you're his brother," Draco said. Regulus's eyes shuttered abruptly. Draco already knew he was right, but now he *really* knew.

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know how you did it," Draco confessed easily. "But you've made yourself look younger, using glamours or something I'm guessing."

Regulus scoffed. "Glamours are easily removed. Surely you already know that. Would you like me to do it?"

Draco felt ruffled, he hated being mocked. "I know how to do it," he replied. He aimed his wand at Regulus before saying the incantation. "*Auferotum*." He'd learned it in a book and he'd never tried to use it before, but he was sure he'd done it correctly.

"See?" Regulus asked when nothing happened.

"Well, maybe that's not how you're doing it, but that doesn't change who you are," Draco said irritably.

"What are you even talking about, Draco?" Regulus said dismissively, his eyes already settling back on his discarded book. Draco growled and pulled the Quidditch picture out of his robe pocket. He'd stolen it from the book a day after his mother showed it to him.

"I know this is you!" Regulus looked at the photo for a long time, far longer than Draco thought was normal. "Don't lie, I know that it's you. You look exactly like him, and there is no Regulus Black III on the family tree. How are you even here? My mother said you died."

She'd actually said that Regulus had gone missing and that he was presumed dead, but Draco didn't really know what that meant so he'd made assumptions.

"How did you get this picture?" Regulus asked faintly.

“My mother had it. I wasn't sure at first, but I know now. You're Regulus Black II, aren't you?”

Regulus sighed, finally looking away from the picture. “Yeah,” he admitted.

“I knew it!” Draco yelled, his heart racing loudly in his ears.

“Silence!” Madam Pince admonished.

“Why are you here? Are you working with Sirius Black?”

“I'm not working with him,” Regulus answered. “I've already told you that. I'm trying to stop him from getting to Harry.”

“Did you know he was going to break out? Is that why you came to school with us in first year?” He'd been wondering about Regulus's intentions since he discovered who he really was. He couldn't make sense of it. Why would an adult want to come back to school?

“Sirius isn't the only person who wants to hurt Harry,” Regulus whispered conspiratorially. Draco's hair stood on end. “I intend to stop them.”

“Who else wants to hurt Harry?” Draco asked, barely even noticing that he'd said his first name. “You don't mean the Dark Lord, do you?” Something spread through his flesh, an intensity he couldn't name. It was just strong enough to sharpen his vision, every detail in the library around him came into abrupt focus.

“What do you know about the Dark Lord?” Regulus asked sharply.

“I know you were one of his followers,” Draco answered without meaning to. It was like something else had taken control of his tongue, moving it for him, directing him.

“Did your father tell you that?”

The sharp vision faltered for a second. “You think I would tell my father about this?”

Madam Pince interrupted them then. They weren't being careful about keeping their voices down and it was clear how irritated she was with them. Regulus managed to evade her after they were kicked out, but Regulus found him the next day, dragging him into an alcove.

“What do you want?” Draco asked curiously.

“You can't tell anyone. At all. Not even your mother,” Regulus warned. Draco frowned.

“Or what?”

“Or I'll obliviate you. I can't have anyone knowing about who I am.”

Draco's eyebrows shot up his forehead in surprise. “Wait, no one else knows? Harry doesn't know?” Draco asked.

“No, no one else knows,” Regulus said, though Draco got the absurd feeling that he was lying.

“I’m not going to tell anyone,” Draco said before he even realized that he’d decided that. It was true though, he had no reason to, and this wasn’t the kind of information that Draco wanted to share. It made him feel special being the only one that knew Regulus’s secret. “How are you planning to catch Sirius?”

“I’m not involving you in that plan,” Regulus said simply. “Now swear on your magic that you won’t tell anyone.”

The rest of third year was mostly forgettable. The odd feeling he’d had in the library, on the train, and at the Quidditch game hadn’t returned and Draco had managed to convince himself that they’d never happened in the first place. It was probably just a cold or something, nothing to worry about.

Potter and Regulus managed to mess up his year, *once again*, when the Hippogriff that mauled him escaped. He’d been planning to watch it be executed, from a distance, of course, he was still terrified of the stupid thing, but he’d been interrupted by *Potter* and his friends. The next morning they all found out about the Hippogriff’s escape. Draco’s father was going to be furious when he learned about it.

He confronted Regulus about it, but of course, Regulus was tightlipped and difficult. Draco thought he would be more fun now that Draco knew his secret.

“You know,” Regulus said, narrowing his eyes—he looked like Draco’s mum when he did that, “Harry was in real danger last night. What if Sirius Black had gotten him?”

The world spun around him for a moment, everything shifting. “I didn’t feel anything,” Draco whispered. So Regulus must be lying, he thought. He couldn’t be telling the truth. Draco would know if *Potter* was in danger. Wouldn’t he have been in danger too? Weren’t their lives tied together? *No!* He shut down that line of thinking aggressively. It wasn’t *real*. It wasn’t.

“What?” Regulus asked curiously.

“Nothing, it’s not important.”

Potter had been in danger and Regulus hadn’t felt anything, that meant he was right, all those other times probably weren’t real. That was a good thing, wasn’t it?

He vowed not to think about it, and for almost half a year he succeeded. His summer was eventful, what with the Quidditch World Cup and the upcoming Triwizard Tournament returning to Hogwarts. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, he had dark dreams about a growing storm, about a threat looming in the distance, creating plans and setting pieces in motion to make their kill, but by the time he woke up in the morning, the dream always felt far away and untouchable. Draco never dwelled on it, he didn’t pay it any mind.

Fourth year started with excitement brewing. Draco didn't think he'd been this thrilled for a school year since first year. The only real downside was Care of Magical Creatures. He shouldn't have bothered to take the course—both of his parents had advised against it, but he'd gone against their wishes in a bid for originality—it was terribly boring, and when it wasn't boring, it was terribly dangerous.

The Blast-Ended Skrewts were some of the grossest creatures Draco had ever come across. He was just thankful that they seemed to avoid him. He wasn't sure why exactly, but they seemed to be more afraid of him than he was of them. He decided to take it as a good thing.

It all turned on its head the night they drew the Triwizard Tournament champion names out of the Goblet of Fire. Draco had waved down Viktor to sit next to him. The students from Durmstrang had sat at the Slytherin table the first night they arrived and Draco had been the first to take up a conversation with Viktor Krum. He couldn't believe a famous Quidditch seeker was sitting next to him, but Viktor seemed more than willing to listen to Draco talk about the school.

"Your face is super red," Theo whispered to Draco once Viktor came to sit near them.

"Bugger off," Draco hissed back. It was just hot in the Great Hall. That was all.

They drew names after dinner and for the most part, it all went as expected. Viktor was picked, naturally, Fleur Delacour was the champion for Beauxbatons, and Cedric Diggory was the champion for Hogwarts. Draco would have preferred a Slytherin, they were definitely going to lose now that a Hufflepuff was competing, but he supposed it could be worse.

But then a final name was spat from the goblet, a name Draco should have been more prepared to hear.

"*Harry Potter*," Dumbledore called and Draco's world tilted on its axis. He gripped the table with an iron strength as vomit boiled up his esophagus. His vision sharpened to the point of pain, narrowing in on *Potter* as he walked shakily toward Dumbledore. Draco was swept up in the absurd desire to help him, to get up and demand his name be removed, to ensure his safety. *Help him*, something inside him hissed.

Draco was the first to leave the Great Hall that night, only barely making it to the boys' restroom before he lost his dinner. Theo found him shortly after, and though Draco tried to fight him, Theo, Crabbe, and Goyle dragged Draco to the Hospital Wing. It was impossible to fight off the three of them.

"Perhaps you ate a bit too much at the feast," Pomfrey said thoughtfully, giving Draco an anti-nausea potion and some tea to further settle his stomach. She made him stay the night, just so she could observe him, but when no other issues presented themselves by morning, she let him go. He rushed right to Snape's office. He had to talk to *someone* and he wasn't about to ask Pomfrey about it.

"Do you know if it's possible," Draco asked slowly, carefully, choosing every word with precision, "for the life of one wizard to be tied to another's?"

Snape gave him a long-suffering look. "Speak plainly, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco usually liked Snape's no-nonsense attitude. He'd known the man since he was a child, he was a friend of the family, and Draco had always enjoyed being around him, but right now, he just wanted to get a clear answer from him without providing too many details.

"Like if one wizard is in danger, could another wizard feel it?"

"Feel it how?" Snape asked.

"I don't know," Draco lied with a shrug. "Maybe they would get sick or something."

Snape watched him carefully, his dark eyes unreadable. "There are ways," Snape said finally, his voice devoid of emotion. "Through illegal blood magic, of course."

Draco looked away. Snape seemed suspicious of him and Draco didn't like that. "Blood magic? Would they both know they were tied together?"

Snape took a beat before answering. "Not necessarily. Blood magic can be done through secretive means, however, it's unlikely. Magic like that leaves a mark and if one wizard was unaware to start, they wouldn't be for long." Draco nodded distantly. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Draco said.

"You aren't planning on embarking on the blood magic route?" Snape asked, his voice lightly sarcastic. Draco snickered under his breath.

"No," he said. "I was just curious."

Draco left feeling only partially satisfied. If he really was tied to *Potter*, then someone would have had to do blood magic on both of them. But who? And when? It seemed unlikely, but there was no way for Draco to check, not without alerting suspicion. There was always that name in his family's book, he thought unwillingly, shoving the idea away the moment it showed itself.

He confronted Regulus about the Triwizard Tournament a few days later, using all of his free time to avoid thinking about it at all. His friends had started mocking *Potter* any time they had the chance and Draco had found that a much more enjoyable topic than his own issues.

"How could you let Harry put his name in the goblet? Did you do it for him?" Draco hissed. He'd meant to approach Regulus calmly, but when he saw Regulus talking to *Potter* and the other Gryffindors, something in him snapped. Violent magic curled through his gut.

"I didn't do anything and neither did Harry," Regulus replied tiredly. Draco could practically see the strain on his shoulders. He was unsatisfied though, he needed answers.

"Well, you need to fix it," Draco said sharply. "You can't just let him go on like this. People die in these tournaments. I know, I looked it up." That part was true, he'd searched up what kind of tasks people in the Triwizard Tournament had to complete when he was first told by his father that the tournament would be happening. He'd had some grandiose dreams about

entering his own name, but when he'd read about the numerous deaths, he'd pushed those fantasies aside.

"Don't you think that if I could get him out of this, I would have done so already?" Regulus asked, his words were venomous. Draco wasn't used to Regulus snapping at him, and his own anger was making him unstable.

"I have no idea what you would do given how poor of a job you've done so far at keeping him safe." Regulus reared back like Draco had hit him, but Draco couldn't bring himself to retract the words. The violence in his gut reveled in watching his words land like physical blows.

"What are these stupid badges about?" Regulus whispered furiously. "You know he didn't ask for this." Regulus huffed angrily.

"Like I'm going to give up an opportunity to—"

"You know, Draco, if you have a crush on him, you can just ask him out," Regulus snapped. Draco's mouth opened in shock for a moment before he whipped his wand out. The words had sent a hot zing of energy up his back.

"I don't have a crush on him," Draco said through clenched teeth, poking his wand into Regulus's chest. He didn't have a crush on anyone, no matter how much Theo mocked him.

"Really? That's not how it seems to me." Draco could feel himself losing control of his magic, but he couldn't get himself to calm down enough to reel it back in. It just kept seeping out of him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Moody's voice came out of nowhere, the man rushing around the corner, wand already drawn. Regulus jumped in front of Draco without a second thought, Draco was grateful for it. His last run-in with Moody had left him with a broken arm and embarrassment so deep he'd thought it would suffocate him.

Regulus jerked his head to the side and Draco took it as his queue to leave, skittering down the hallway, thankful that his magic obeyed him enough to let him move.

He hadn't gotten any answers though, other than the confirmation that Regulus wasn't responsible for *Potter's* name coming out of the goblet. Draco already knew that though, Regulus would never have allowed *Potter* to enter that tournament. It didn't give him anything to go off of for the future though. *Potter* would still be in danger by the time he showed up for the first task, and Draco, if the past was any indication, would feel every moment of it.

Still, Draco tried to maintain a sense of normalcy, and it wasn't like he could just hole up in his dorm room and wait for the task to be over, not when the entire school—including all of his friends—were going to be in attendance. He would just have to hope that he could control himself. He didn't eat anything that day just in case.

By the time the task was over, and *Potter* had faced a *dragon*, a real-life *dragon*, Draco was shaking so badly that he thought his skin would shiver right off of his bones. It was terrible, discomfort worse than any time before

He had to leave the arena long before Harry made it out.

“He just sat there the whole time, it was so boring,” Crabbe complained once the other Slytherins had returned to the dorm to find Draco reading calmly in bed, pretending like nothing was the matter.

“I knew it would be,” Draco lied. Crabbe and Goyle laughed. Draco didn’t notice anyone else’s reaction, he didn’t want to know if Theo or Blaise suspected anything.

Those feelings fell dormant after the first task, though he felt a small trickle of them at the Yule Ball. He didn’t understand why, *Potter* certainly wasn’t in any danger at the ball, unless the magic that tied them together counted poor dancing as dangerous, which given the way Luna and *Potter* were jerking around, maybe it was.

The Yule Ball presented a different sort of issue for Draco though. He and Pansy had been friends for years, almost longer than he’d been friends with any of the other Slytherins, but she’d always seemed a bit too self-absorbed to notice anything about him. She at least seemed to believe his lies about what was happening to him every time *Potter* was in danger. He hadn’t expected her to be so observant when it came to everything else.

“I think we should date,” Pansy said solemnly the morning after the Yule Ball.

“Sorry?” Draco asked. He’d been reading one of the letters from his mother and hadn’t even noticed her approaching.

“That way no one notices you.”

“What do you mean?” Draco asked, dread pooling inside him.

Pansy rolled her eyes then began to pick at her nails like the topic of conversation was boring her. “I’ve seen the way you look at Krum, you know. I’m not *stupid*.”

“How do I look at Krum?”

“The same way half the girls in our school look at Cedric Diggory.”

“What?” Draco gasped.

“It’s so obvious, Draco,” she drawled. “I don’t care, obviously, but if it gets back to your father...”

“My father?” Draco was barely paying attention to the conversation, he was still too focused on the relief he felt that they weren’t talking about him and *Potter*.

“You just never know,” Pansy said dismissively. “I’m just saying that people won’t notice so much if they think you have a girlfriend.”

“I don’t think anyone is noticing anything,” Draco said. “There is nothing to notice!”

Pansy clicked her teeth together once. “Theo,” she called. Theo glanced over, he was practicing one of his spells that would inevitably light a piece of furniture on fire. “Who does Draco have a crush on?”

“Krum,” Theo said with a small snicker.

“What? No, I don’t!”

“Give it up, Draco,” Pansy said with grave importance.

They must have argued for another half an hour before Draco gave in and allowed Pansy to call herself his girlfriend. He hoped it wouldn’t backfire.

The second task was nearly as bad as the first, though Draco couldn’t see what was happening to *Potter* at all beyond what he felt. Luckily, it ended before Draco could swan dive into the water and swim after the stupid Gryffindor. He was less than happy with Regulus though, especially given that he’d been the real mastermind behind *Potter’s* approach to the first task.

“I have already told you a million times,” Regulus said when Draco confronted him about it, “he’s not going to do anything. The second task was a fluke, but he is going avoid the danger altogether for the third one.”

“And you’re sure? Do you know what the task is yet?” Draco pushed. They needed to have a plan for the third task. It was sure to be the most dangerous, and Draco wasn’t prepared to die if something really awful happened to *Potter*.

“Why don’t you ask your father if he knows?” Regulus asked. Draco was almost positive that he’d said it sarcastically, but after thinking it over, he decided it was worth a shot. That night he wrote a letter to his father, he made it long and rambling so that his father wouldn’t suspect anything, and stuck the question about the third task at the very end.

Nearly a week passed before his father wrote back, Regulus almost thought he wouldn’t bother, but there at the bottom of his father’s letter was an explanation of the third task.

Do not share this information with any of your friends, or any rogue Hufflepuffs or Gryffindors.

Draco laughed when he read it, both he and his father were hoping Krum would win, though they weren’t planning to share that with anyone.

“Regulus,” Draco hissed to get Regulus’s attention. “Over here.” He’d hid inside an alcove to wait for Regulus, but his heart was pounding with adrenaline. Helping Regulus was like breaking the rules, it made him nervous, but he couldn’t deny the excitement that filled him when he did it.

“What?”

“Get in,” Draco hissed, grabbing Regulus by the cloak and dragging him behind the rug that hid the alcove.

“What’s going on?” Regulus asked.

“I figured out the task,” Draco said triumphantly.

“You did? How?” Regulus asked.

“My father told me,” Draco said. Regulus looked surprised by that.

“Okay, what is it then?”

“It’s a labyrinth!” Draco shouted before covering his mouth and then speaking in a much quieter voice. “It’s a maze. There will be a bunch of enchantments and creatures that they’ll have to get by.”

“A maze,” Regulus breathed.

“I don’t know all of them, but I know there is going to be a boggart, an acromantula, and I think a sphinx,” Draco said. He was speaking so quickly that his words blended together, but he couldn’t make himself slow down. “My father said Hagrid is donating the creatures, so I bet he’ll add one of those terrible skrewts he made.”

“Yeah, I bet he will,” Regulus said faintly. Draco grinned wildly. “This is — this is very helpful, Draco. You have no idea.”

Draco filled with warmth, pleased by the praise. After a second, he came back to himself and remembered who he was talking to. He forced his face into a serious expression, pressing down his embarrassment.

“Do not tell Potter I told you this,” Draco said. “And — and — and if he wins then I’ll make sure everyone knows you were cheating.”

Regulus threw his hands up. “Of course, I’m trying to keep him alive.”

Draco nodded seriously, then swept out of the alcove. There, he thought, that should be enough to keep *Potter* alive.

Unfortunately, the final task went far worse than Draco could have predicted. Draco sat sandwiched between his friends in the stands watching the champions enter the labyrinth one by one. He knew he would be affected by what happened in the maze either way, if *Potter* was about to face a bunch of dangerous creatures then Draco was sure to feel it. He’d planned ahead this time though. He wouldn’t be caught unaware again.

“This is boring,” Draco sneered loudly. “We can’t even see anything.” His friends nodded along, but Draco thought they might have been placating him. He didn’t care either way. “I’ll be back,” he said, satisfied that he’d given them a reason for his absence before he headed back up to the castle.

The odd feelings started seeping into his body when he was halfway back to the dorm. They weren't unmanageable though, he could still walk, though a sheen of sweat broke out across his skin. He noticed that the farther he got from the labyrinth, the more the feelings affected him. He wondered if they would have been less intense had he stayed in the stands.

The common room was completely abandoned, so Draco threw himself onto one of the couches, watching as the dying fire reignited in his presence. He figured he was in for a long evening, who knew how long it would take for the final task to finish? He closed his eyes and for the first time, he let the feelings consume him.

He'd never had the time to examine them, not really, and it was different now that he knew he was safe and knew what to expect. With his eyes closed, it felt like he was floating on an unruly lake. Sometimes the movements would even out and sometimes they would grow violent, turning his stomach like seasickness. The desire to rush back to the labyrinth, to claw through the tall hedges until he found *Potter* wasn't overpowering, but it was definitely there.

It wasn't a voice exactly, he realized, it was more like a being all of its own as if there was another version of him, a cursed version, that was fighting for control. Draco could subdue it easily now, but he'd felt what that version of him could do, he knew it was powerful.

The minutes ticked by and Draco began to grow tired, drifting off every now and again. He was thinking he might get up and head back soon—surely it was almost over—when pain seared down his back. He felt like someone was trying to break open his ribs, claw through his spine, and tear him in pieces.

He shouted, tumbling off the couch and onto the rug-covered floor. He tried to move, to go, escape, or run, or do anything, but his body was shaking too badly.

Someone was shouting his name, he thought distantly, but Draco couldn't respond to them. He was nearly convulsing by the time someone turned him on his back. His vision was blacking out every couple of seconds, and he was starting to hope that he would lose consciousness, anything would have been better than this, but his body kept fighting to stay awake.

He could see someone moving above him, there was shouting and harsh whispers, but Draco couldn't make out any of it.

When darkness finally took him, he was sure he would die. Only when he woke a moment later in the Hospital Wing did he breathe a sigh of relief.

He was alive.

Pansy was in the chair next to him, her eyes boring into his when he blinked them open.

"You're going to tell me what's wrong with you," Pansy said, her usually high-pitched voice deep and angry.

“I—” Draco croaked. He coughed so violently that Pansy had to force water down his throat. When he could speak again, he said, “I don’t know what it is.”

Pansy ground her teeth together but said nothing.

He found out later that the other Slytherins had come back looking for him at some point during the third task, but they found him having a fit in the common room. He was nearly foaming at the mouth apparently, Crabbe seemed so disgusted by it that he could barely describe what happened. Draco burned with humiliation.

Anger was quick to follow, but he had no one to aim it towards. *Potter* was still recovering in one of the hospital beds and Regulus had nearly been murdered by their Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. It wasn’t a good night for anyone, all Draco could do was simmer in his helplessness.

Draco avoided the news as much as he could during the summer. He spent his mornings and afternoons sitting near the family books in the library, but he could never get himself to open the Malfoy one again. He read up on blood magic and was almost disappointed when he concluded that it had nothing to do with what was happening to him.

His father was gone most days and his mother was constantly entertaining. Sometimes Draco would visit with his friends, but he spent most of his time alone. The few times he bothered to read *The Daily Prophet* he felt sick to his stomach. Every single article was about Dumbledore and *Potter*, the lies they’d spun after the final task of the Triwizard Tournament, and what Dumbledore might be planning.

Draco didn’t know what to think. He couldn’t ask his father about it, he wouldn’t dare. The only person he wanted to speak to was Regulus. Regulus would be honest with him, he’d tell him the truth. He thought about writing him, even drafted a few letters during the hot summer months, but he never sent any of them. What if they were intercepted? He couldn’t risk it.

When Draco did see his father, they mostly talked about the changes coming to Hogwarts. Minister Fudge was planning on sending one of his own trusted employees to fulfill the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. Dolores Umbridge. Draco had met her a handful of times, but he didn’t know much about her. His father smirked as he talked to Draco about it, which didn’t bode well for Regulus and the other Gryffindors. Draco didn’t know how to feel. His father said Umbridge coming to Hogwarts was a good thing, and his father didn’t usually lie to him, but if Regulus was going to be affected, that would be bad, right?

He found it all very confusing.

Near the end of the summer, he had another episode, this one tore him from his bed. He’d been in the middle of a very pleasant dream when his body filled with dreaded cold. By the time it was over, Draco was halfway to the fireplace, floo powder already in hand like he was going to leave Malfoy Manor in search of *Potter*. He was grateful he didn’t do that, his issues were embarrassing enough without showing up in the middle of the summer unannounced.

It did make him wonder if the other version of him, the one that was tied to *Potter*, would know how to find him. Draco didn't know where Regulus lived and he definitely didn't know where *Potter* lived, but then again, the other version of him was heading for the floo. He must have had an idea of where to go.

By the time Draco was on the train back to school, he was nearly sick with worry for Regulus. *Potter* had almost been expelled, it would have been a relief. Draco would have loved to spend the year *Potter-free*. He'd managed to stay in school with the help of Dumbledore though. That wasn't exactly a surprise, but Draco's father had told him that Fudge was even more disappointed after *Potter's* trial.

"Umbridge might ask for your help," Lucius said to him the morning before Draco headed to Hogwarts. "I want you to offer up your assistance. That Potter boy is a dangerous presence for the school and Umbridge will find a way to remove him."

"She's coming to expel Potter?" Draco asked curiously.

"Do not share that with anyone," his father said. Draco just nodded, he knew the drill. "Fudge isn't happy with Regulus Black either. Crouch Junior's death was suspicious and Fudge is sure Black had something to do with it. Not to mention that he may have had something to do with Sirius Black escaping."

"Right," Draco agreed. He knew most of that already. There had been more than a few articles about Sirius Black's location and Crouch's death. He wasn't prepared for how worried he would be for Regulus's safety going back to Hogwarts though. Regulus was an adult, after all, he could handle himself, but everything felt different now. It felt more serious.

His worry only grew after his first Defense class. Umbridge was a piece of work and he could already sense the way students would react to her. Even among the Slytherins, she was deeply disliked. He decided to warn Regulus the first moment he got.

"What's going on?" Regulus asked. He'd grown over the summer and his hair, which he'd always worn a little too long, looked shabby like he'd forgotten to even trim it. The dark circles under his eyes looked more pronounced. He almost looked like a corpse.

"Listen, I'm not warning you because—" Draco started.

"Draco," Regulus said sharply, Draco's mouth snapped closed. "I don't care, just skip to the warning. I don't have time to listen to your reasons." He sounded tired, far more tired than the last time Draco had seen him. Draco thought about the way he'd looked laying in a hospital bed at the end of fourth year. He'd looked so close to death then, though Pomfrey had assured him that he'd be okay.

Draco frowned deeply, stung by Regulus's dismissal, but he pushed on, knowing he would regret it if he didn't at least try.

"Umbridge, the new Defense professor, works for Minister Fudge."

"Yes," Regulus said, nodding for him to go on.

“You have to be careful,” Draco said, then lowered his voice even further. “My father said that she’s here to try and have you arrested, and based on the class I just had with her, she’s very good at provoking people.”

“I’m not easily provoked,” Regulus said, blinking slowly like he was trying to convince Draco of his levelheadedness. Or perhaps he was just fighting to stay awake.

“Yes, but—” Draco’s hands flailed out helplessly. He needed Regulus to understand, Regulus was the only one that really listened to him.

“But?” Regulus prompted. Draco struggled to find the words that wouldn’t entirely give him away.

“Other Gryffindors are,” Draco finally settled on.

“Ah,” Regulus said with a knowing nod. Draco bristled at the small smile that crossed Regulus’s face. It wasn’t exactly smug, but it was approaching it.

“I’ll be careful,” Regulus said placatingly. “Do you know anything else about her?”

“Not yet,” Draco said.

“Let me know if you find out anything,” Regulus said, then surprised Draco by reaching up to grab his arm gently. “We’re family, and we have to stick together. That’s the only way we’re going to make it out of this.”

Draco’s shoulders dropped from where he’d been holding them up by his ears. He’d been right to tell Regulus, he’d been right to trust him. Regulus was right, they were family, and though Draco hadn’t ever expected to meet his presumed dead cousin, he was decidedly glad to have him around.

He could only hope that his warning would be enough. Draco, for his part, decided to follow through with what his father asked of him, volunteering to help Umbridge. After all, Dumbledore was a terrible headmaster, Draco’s father had assured him of that his entire life, and if Umbridge was here to do something about that, then she couldn’t be all bad. Dumbledore had let a half-giant teach a course here, for Salazar’s sake. He was insane.

News of Regulus’s detention with Umbridge reached him only an hour after the detention had been assigned. It seemed like everyone was aware of Umbridge’s opinion on *Potter’s* tales about the Dark Lord, and given that most people didn’t believe him, they seemed infatuated with the way Umbridge was treating him.

Draco had expected that *Potter* would be the first to get into trouble. He hadn’t expected it to happen to Regulus.

They all knew when Regulus was serving detention, and Draco, who seemed incapable of leaving well enough alone, couldn’t stop himself from lingering near Umbridge’s classroom late into the night, pacing the less-used hallways near the classroom and staying out of sight.

He planned to confront Regulus the moment he saw him, but when he finally reentered the corridor and found Regulus lying next to a pool of vomit, he felt nothing but irate anger.

“*Evanesco*,” Draco cast as he approached, vanishing the vomit. “What are you doing? You can’t sleep here,” he hissed, looming over Regulus who blinked blearily up at him.

“I wasn’t planning to sleep here,” Regulus said unhappily. He just looked so tired, that was all Draco could think. What happened to him this summer? Draco wished he’d asked earlier.

“I told you not to engage with her! I warned you not to,” Draco whispered furiously. “What did she do to you?”

Regulus held out his hand, Draco gasped and covered his mouth like he might also be sick. Carved into the back of his hand, bloody and swollen, were the words ‘*I will make the right choices.*’

“She carved words into your hand?” Draco breathed.

“She used a blood quill,” Regulus said. “Had me do it to myself.”

Draco didn’t know what to say for a moment, but he couldn’t leave Regulus like this. He turned around and began sprinting down the corridor.

“Stay here,” he called over his shoulder. He made it to the common room in record time, sneaking into the dorm and digging through his trunk for the dittany he had hidden there. He didn’t notice if any of his dorm mates were awake to see him, but he decided that he didn’t care.

“Oh,” Regulus said when he saw what Draco was carrying as Draco rushed back down the corridor. Regulus had sat up at some point after Draco had left him and his face looked far paler than it had before. It worried Draco deeply.

“I had some extra in my trunk,” Draco said by way of explanation. “Why did you get detention with her? Were you trying to find out more information about her? Did she tell you anything?” He spoke quickly as he began applying the dittany to Regulus’s hand. He’d never healed anyone else before, but he was used to getting cuts and bruises as a kid and he knew how to heal them. Dobby had shown him once and Draco had never forgotten it.

“Harry was about to say something to her that he shouldn’t, I was just drawing attention away,” Regulus explained. Draco froze for a second, his hands locking into place as a spike of panic went through him.

“Would she have done this to Harry?” he asked quietly. His vision was sharpening again, he noticed. *Calm down*, he whispered to himself. His other self only half listened.

“Almost certainly,” Regulus said, mostly because it was true.

Calm down, Draco thought again. He said it repeatedly until his skin felt less tight until his hands began to work again. *Potter* wasn’t even in danger, it was just imagined, it was just a possibility. This was getting ridiculous.

“What are you going to do?” Draco asked quietly as he wrapped up Regulus’s hand in a bandage he’d brought with him.

“Nothing you need to worry about,” Regulus said with a sigh, looking away from Draco and staring off down the hallway like he was seeing something Draco couldn’t. For the first time, Draco heard a darkness in his words, a promise of something horrible. He wondered if it would have disturbed him under other circumstances. He’d never thought of Regulus as dangerous before.

Every day of fifth year seemed to be more tedious than the last, though overall it wasn’t a bad year. *Potter*, Regulus, and the others were up to something and Umbridge had them all trying to figure out what it was. Draco was sure that Theo was involved somehow, but he didn’t care enough to confront him about it. He and Theo had always gotten along fine, but Theo wasn’t like his other friends, he wasn’t afraid to stand up to Draco, and though Draco wasn’t afraid of him, he also didn’t want to spend his time getting into fights with someone he had to share a room with.

Some moments of fifth year were worse than others, like when Draco was viciously *attacked* by *Potter* and one of the Weasley twins after a Quidditch game. They were a bunch of animals. Honestly.

Most days were just dull.

His mood wasn’t helped by the letters he was receiving from his mother. He’d come home for Christmas to a nearly empty house, his parents spending every meal eating in stark silence. They would barely even look at each other.

He knew something was going on, but he didn’t ask about it. It was all too uncomfortable.

In January, right after the holiday break ended, there was a massive breakout from Azkaban, and Draco jolted in shock when he noticed the name of his aunt listed among the other escaped prisoners. He thought about that picture his mother had shown him, of the three sisters. He wondered if she would be happy to know her sister was out of prison.

“Azkaban is not as secure as they say, huh?” Blaise said under his breath.

“Someone planned this one,” Pansy replied, “but yeah, it’s not that secure. I mean if that Crouch guy was able to get out years ago...”

“Who knows who else is going to escape,” Blaise mumbled.

The year seemed to devolve from there. *Potter* gave an interview for the *Quibbler*, a ridiculous magazine that almost no one read, but in it, he talked about all the Death Eaters that showed up to support the Dark Lord. Draco had tried not to think too much about the Dark Lord or about whether *Potter* was telling the truth, but given his own reaction during the third task, he thought he may have already believed him.

He would hate to admit it out loud, but he didn't actually think *Potter* would lie about something like that. If he had been lying, surely Regulus would have said something. He at least had the decency to warn Draco about the interview and the fact that his father would be mentioned.

Still, Draco hadn't thought much about it until he read the magazine article himself. Umbridge banned the magazine the afternoon after it was released, but the damage was already done.

Draco's father had laughed as *Potter* was tortured by the Dark Lord. That's what *Potter* said in his interview. His father had *laughed*.

The thought made him sick. He'd always trusted his father, even when things didn't go their way, even when Regulus was nearly killed in second year. Draco had still trusted Lucius.

It all just seemed so dark to him, it seemed unfathomable.

He went home for the Easter Holiday certain that he was going to confront his father. He had to know if what *Potter* said was true, and if that meant learning the truth about the Dark Lord returning, then so be it. Unfortunately, the moment he stepped inside Malfoy Manor, all his plans flew out the window.

Standing next to his mother, leaning to the side like she couldn't stand up straight any longer, a dangerous glint in her eyes, was Bellatrix Lestrange.

He hadn't even had the good sense to be afraid of her yet. He didn't know what she was like, he hadn't ever cared. He'd always assumed he'd never meet the woman. He didn't think she'd just show up in his house.

"Little Draco," she greeted, sending a shiver up Draco's spine.

By the time he made it back to Hogwarts, Draco was contemplating never returning home. He knew that was a bit dramatic, a bit ridiculous, but Bellatrix was terrifying and she was *everywhere*. Every single time he left his bedroom, Bellatrix would find him, creeping around the house like a ghoul sent just to haunt him.

She was also disturbingly touchy. Whenever she spoke to him, she would slide forward and grip him with her spindly fingers. Draco hated it, it made his skin crawl, but his mother kept giving him that look that meant '*Remember to be polite.*' Draco was about done with being polite, especially to Bellatrix Lestrange.

By the time May rolled around, Draco was just hoping the year would come to a peaceful end. Dumbledore was removed as headmaster and Umbridge had taken his place, but Draco didn't have the energy to worry about *Potter* and Regulus. He was too worried about himself.

When Umbridge finally discovered *Potter* and the others doing something wrong, Draco was ashamed to admit that he was caught off guard. He hadn't been prepared for it, he'd thought

Regulus had it handled, but there they were, all trapped in Umbridge's office as she threatened Regulus.

"The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue," she whispered, her voice carrying the dark promise of pain. Draco could hear the same hunger in Umbridge's voice that he detected in Bellatrix's. His stomach dropped into the souls of his feet.

"NO!" *Potter* shouted. Draco was holding him as he'd been instructed, and though *Potter* was fighting against him roughly, Draco seemed to have no problem controlling him. If *Potter* was able to get free, he would be in danger. It was that simple. His other self, whoever he was, could do anything if it meant keeping *Potter* safe.

"No!" Hermione shrieked. "Professor Umbridge, it's illegal!"

Umbridge didn't appear to hear her, her eyes were locked on Regulus's strained face, her wand held tightly in her stubby fingers.

Draco only barely heard the exchange from there, he didn't want to hear Regulus getting tortured—he was still thinking about his father laughing while it happened to *Potter*, so he nearly missed the point where he was being dragged out of the office with Umbridge and Regulus, leaving *Potter* unconscious behind him. How much trouble could he get in like that?

Regulus was going to show her some secret, Draco wasn't sure what, but when they made it to the forest, Regulus merely had to direct her into the trees and she was gone.

"I can't believe you tricked her like that," Draco said faintly, he felt a bit lightheaded, but at the same time, it was like a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. "Do you think she'll find her way back out?"

"I have no idea," Regulus responded. "I'm sure she will though. She's an adult, she can take care of herself." Regulus seemed pleased as he said it, as if he was enjoying a silent private joke.

Draco nodded in agreement. "What were you doing in her office anyway?"

"Trying to talk to Sirius. I needed to check in with him and could only do it through the floo."

"You should have told me," Draco said petulantly. "I could have helped you."

"Why would you help me talk to Sirius?" Regulus asked. Draco shrugged but didn't answer. He was a bit embarrassed to realize that he would help Regulus with just about anything if he asked. They walked in silence the rest of the way to Umbridge's office—Draco guessed Regulus still needed to speak to Sirius—but when they approached they saw Theo talking softly to Lavender and Parvati.

"You're back," Theo said blandly, looking at Regulus with grave suspicion.

"What's happening? Why are you out here?" Regulus asked, his voice cutting.

“What is he doing with you?” Lavender asked snidely, glaring at Draco. Draco sneered back without a second thought.

“He helped me trick Umbridge,” Regulus said. Draco gasped. He did no such thing. He wasn't even asked. “Where are the others?”

“They left,” Parvati said.

Regulus froze. “They what?”

“We managed to trick the others into eating some of the Puking Pastilles that the twins left behind,” Theo said. “Then Hermione revived Harry and the rest of them left through the floo.”

“Where did they go?” Draco asked, his voice sounded weird, even to his own ears, and it almost felt like he wasn't speaking, as if someone was digging their fingers into his jaw and forcing it open and closed to make words come out.

“Harry said they had to get to the Ministry. He wanted us to tell you, we were about to go looking for you,” Lavender said faintly.

“Go get Snape now,” Regulus said to Draco, but Theo, Lavender, and Parvati were listening closely like they were about to jump into action.

“Snape?” Theo asked, he was looking at Draco as he said it, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“Tell him that Harry and the others have gone to the Department of Mysteries. Tell him to get the Order and meet me there.”

“What’s happening? Why did they go to the Ministry?” Draco interrupted to ask. His voice... why did his voice sound like that?

“It’s complicated, but Harry just walked into a trap set by Death Eaters. They are all in danger.” Regulus spoke quickly, panting like he was out of breath.

“What are you going to do?” Draco asked.

“I’m going to follow them,” Regulus said, forcing his way into Umbridge’s office.

Draco waited only a second to turn to the others. “Go tell Snape,” Draco said. If his voice had sounded weird before, it sounded nearly inhuman now. Parvati and Lavender blinked at him, their eyes dulling in color like someone was sucking the life out of them. Theo turned away as if to hide his face.

“We’ll do it,” he called through his hands, his voice muffled. “Just go.”

Draco didn’t need to be told twice, he practically flew through Umbridge’s office to the fireplace, but by the time he’d caught up with Regulus in the Ministry Atrium, he felt like he was barely real. It was like the other version of himself was stretching out through all of his bones and flesh like he was being inhabited. He could hear himself speaking and feel himself

moving, but it wasn't until his father was knocked unconscious by Regulus that he came back to himself.

"I can't just leave him here," Draco said. "If the Order is coming then they might hurt him."

Regulus paused for a moment. "Then leave and take him with you," he snapped harshly. Draco flinched, hurt building in his chest, but he didn't try to argue with him. He couldn't leave his father here, he shouldn't be here at all. He couldn't understand why he'd followed Regulus at all.

He took his father home, and before his father could say much of anything, Draco was shooed back to Hogwarts. His father didn't answer any of his questions, and Draco couldn't argue with him.

After returning to Hogwarts, he felt he was in free fall, everything was chaos, but then Umbridge never returned and Draco was questioned about what happened to her.

"Regulus was the one showing her something," Draco said unhelpfully. "I don't know anything."

"Regulus Black is dead," Dumbledore informed him gravely.

Draco snapped his mouth shut and didn't speak again until he was on the train home. Even then, it was only a few words.

Regulus was *dead*? He was gone? Just like that? Draco didn't cry, not when he first heard and not where anyone could see him, but when he made it home to find the Dark Lord, a malefic magic already settling into the walls of the manor, Draco did cry. He locked himself in his room once his father dismissed him. He'd been forced to kiss the Dark Lord's hand. He didn't even look *human*.

And Regulus was gone.

He was gone and Draco didn't have anyone else he could talk to.

By the end of the summer, Draco had cried more than he thought was possible. He always locked himself in his bedroom to do it, he didn't want anyone else in the house—his parents included—to see him like that. On top of that, Draco had the displeasure of having many, *many* meetings with the Dark Lord.

He could honestly say that he'd never experienced fear like that. It was like being swallowed whole by an emotion, all of his muscles locking in place. He never made eye contact with him, even as he was told what would be expected of him when he went back to school.

One day during the summer, Bellatrix, his deranged aunt was murdered. "She was torn to shreds," he heard one of the Death Eaters whisper. Draco's mother was in a panic over her death, someone had invaded the manor, had killed Bellatrix in cold blood, and escaped without a trace. It was a huge problem, and somehow Draco knew his family would pay for it, but even then, he couldn't bring himself to care.

The Dark Lord might punish them, it didn't matter either way. He'd already given Draco an impossible task, what more could they suffer? Draco would never be able to do what was asked of him. Dumbledore was one of the most powerful wizards alive, and Draco was just a stupid kid. He was nothing.

He nodded, he accepted his task, and he went back to Hogwarts feeling hollow, every emotion he'd felt the year before buried somewhere under fear.

He didn't even have the emotional ability to react to Regulus Black himself dragging Draco into an empty compartment on the train.

"Oh, it's you," Draco said as he slammed the door open. He strode into the compartment, stopping the moment he was inside to cross his arms tightly across his chest. "What do you want?" he sneered.

Regulus cast a locking and silencing charm at the door, lowering the shade with a spell. "You're not even a little surprised to see me?" Regulus asked. He almost sounded hurt. Draco didn't respond. "Sit down, Draco."

"Think I'll stand," Draco said stiffly. "Actually, I think I'll leave."

"Did he mark you?" Regulus asked quickly. Draco felt everything in him threaten to boil over, but just for a moment, and then it was gone, fizzling away into nothing.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't lie to me, Draco," Regulus said.

"Stop saying my name!" Draco growled. He leaned down menacingly when he said it, baring his teeth. It was like hearing the name of a dead person, the name of someone that Draco had already buried and mourned. It was his own, and yet he couldn't comprehend it.

"Do you have one of these?" Regulus said sharply, lifting his sleeve to show the inflamed Dark Mark that was etched into his skin. Draco flinched away from it, sick and dizzy from the sight of it. His back slammed into the glass door.

"What—" he breathed.

"You can tell me, Draco. I won't judge you," Regulus said softly, finally dropping his sleeve.

"I wasn't — He didn't mark me," Draco whispered.

"But he did give you a task," Regulus said.

Draco tried not to flinch. That was something that existed only in the dark, bubbling shame of his bedroom back at the manor. He'd resigned himself not to think of it. "How do you know about that?"

"It's not important—" Regulus started to say, waving his hand like it didn't matter. Rage filled Draco's head, loud and impossible to ignore.

“You were dead,” Draco snarled suddenly. “You weren’t here, you don’t know what I had to — You can’t help me, so just stay away from me.”

“Or what?” Regulus asked, raising one eyebrow questioningly.

“Or I’ll make you regret ever coming back from the dead.” Draco yanked the door open, Regulus’s locking charm falling away as he did, and stomped out of the compartment.

Regulus was back and it didn’t even matter. It was too late for Draco. If he was lucky, Dumbledore would kill him before he was sent back to the Dark Lord. Beyond that, it didn’t really matter.

Draco’s plans for killing Dumbledore were malformed and halfhearted, but he still put them into motion. His heart wasn’t in it, he supposed, but his heart wasn’t in anything, maybe it didn’t exist anymore.

He nearly forgot about his whole connection to Potter. It didn’t matter anymore either way, hopefully, he wouldn’t be around long enough for Potter’s life to really affect his. He barely even thought about it, even as Potter began to haunt every moment of Draco’s life.

Draco could sense Potter watching him, his eyes like burning coals placed against his skin, but he didn’t care. He would have killed for attention like this only a few years ago, but now, it was mostly just annoying.

Regulus’s attention was even worse. He kept trying to interrupt him and undo or take over his plans. He intervened with Katie Bell and Rosmerta, and he kept demanding that Draco tell him everything and allow Regulus to help. Draco wondered if it would have been a welcome life raft under different circumstances. Being under Regulus’s protection should have been a good thing, but since his death, it all just felt far away and useless.

How could Regulus protect him when Regulus was already under the thumb of the Dark Lord? It wasn’t like Regulus could stop him. He went home for Christmas a failure and was met with the cold ire of the Dark Lord. He escaped punishment but his father made it clear that that would not happen again, that Draco *must* succeed. His father looked like a helpless child, walking around the manor like he was merely a visitor. Their home had been stolen from them, and his father had allowed it to happen.

Draco went back to school with renewed initiative, but it only took the length of the train ride for him to remember the fact that he was a student and Dumbledore was a master wizard who had lived over one hundred years.

He fell back into melancholy and emptiness, barely even trying to come up with new plans. He hadn’t thought of anything since the wine idea, and for all he knew, Slughorn hadn’t even given it to Dumbledore yet.

Not until Regulus was nearly killed did Draco come out of his haze.

It was wine meant for Dumbledore, Snape told him. Slughorn had given some to Regulus as a celebration and Regulus was nearly killed. If it hadn't been for Potter, Regulus would be dead, again, this time by Draco's own hand.

He went to visit him that night in the Hospital Wing, sneaking in well after curfew.

"Draco?" Regulus called, his voice scratchy. He coughed twice to clear it. "Draco?" he repeated.

Draco didn't reply and he didn't look up at Regulus, he couldn't bring himself to meet his eye. He hadn't thought it was possible to feel more self-loathing than he already felt, but here he was.

"Was I poisoned?" Regulus asked, looking around curiously. Draco could feel his eyes sliding back to him, but he still didn't look up. "It was you, wasn't it?" he whispered.

"Slughorn wasn't supposed to keep it," Draco whispered after a long few moments. He felt tears prick his eyes, his shame on display.

Regulus nodded. "Okay," Regulus said.

"Okay?" Draco asked, confused.

"I asked you before to tell me everything," Regulus said stiffly, Draco flinched like he'd been struck. "I knew you were keeping something else from me, and I didn't push. I gave you time to come to me on your own and you didn't."

Draco made a small aborted sound. He'd never been scolded like this, not ever.

"I have given you as much time as I can, Draco. I need to know everything. Anything else you're keeping from me, I need to know."

Draco shook his head rapidly. "There isn't anything else."

"Draco."

"There isn't!" he hissed indignantly. "That was it. It was—I thought it would just fix the—there isn't anything else." He left out the part about him not coming up with any new plans, Regulus didn't need to know how useless he was.

"Do you not understand the seriousness of what you've done?" Regulus said, sitting up quickly so that his face was level with Draco's. "I nearly died. I am your *only ally* and you almost killed me."

Draco really did feel tears well up then, he blinked quickly to clear them. He wouldn't cry in front of Regulus.

"You will tell me everything or I'll force you to."

"Force me?"

“Yes,” Regulus said.

“I can’t,” Draco said frantically.

“What else could you possibly be keeping from me? What else don’t I know?”

They were interrupted by Pomfrey that night, but he eventually confessed the last piece of the puzzle, the other task he’d been given. He’d hoped to keep it to himself if only to try and succeed on his own, but Regulus was too hard to lie to. Regulus took over the plans for the cabinet, disallowing Draco access to the Room of Hidden Things completely.

It led to a very peculiar time at Hogwarts. He had an enormous pressure on his shoulders, but he couldn’t do anything about it. However, it didn’t feel as hopeless as it had before, instead, it felt comforting. Regulus had taken it all from him and for once, Draco felt something ease in his chest.

He’d almost expected it all to resolve itself, until suddenly Potter was following him in the bathroom, the same bathroom he’d been wasting time in all year. He hadn’t wanted to spend time with his friends and Moaning Myrtle was surprisingly good company when he got passed all the whimpering. He’d found peace there and now Potter was rushing in.

Annoyance was the first emotion he felt, but quickly it turned to anger and rage so intense that he was flinging spells before he could stop himself. *Potter* was doing the exact same thing. Back and forth the spells flew, destroying the bathroom stalls and blowing the sinks off the walls. It was madness, but Draco’s magic sizzled at his fingertips, it burned through him, it lit him on fire.

He wasn’t sure how it happened exactly, but the thought of a spell so harsh and specific that it would seal his fate with a simple utterance entered his mind and the other piece of himself, the one that had lay dormant for months and months, broke free from its capture. He lunged for Harry just as Harry bared his teeth in anger, throwing down his wand like they were going brawl like muggles, but there was something else in his eyes, a fervent hunger that pulled at the bottom of Draco’s spine.

Draco had no intention of hitting him. He grabbed him by the front of his shirt, their mouths slamming together with so much intensity that their teeth clicked, splitting open Draco’s lip.

Harry dragged him closer with an intensity that set Draco’s skin on fire, his nails digging possessively into Harry’s hair, his body pressing Harry’s up against the wall.

Only magic could pull them apart, and when it did, Draco nearly collapsed, the other part of himself shrinking back into his body and leaving him nothing but a shell for a solid two breaths before feeling returned to all of his limbs.

They’d been caught. They’d been caught *kissing*. By Regulus and Snape.

Draco didn’t know if he’d ever been so mortified.

They were dragged up to Dumbledore's office without a word, and Draco's mind was racing with possibilities. Were they going to get in trouble for destroying the bathroom? Probably but it seemed a bit extreme to include the headmaster in that. Students got into fights all the time. It wasn't *that* big of a deal.

He sat next to *Potter*, their shoulders inches apart, and he worked not to think about what he'd just been doing. His lip was a bit swollen from where it had split while they were kissing and the stinging pain was a constant reminder of how *Potter* had felt pressed against him. He'd never kissed anyone before, not even Pansy when she was his fake girlfriend.

Oh, Merlin, is Pansy still my girlfriend? He hadn't thought about it in literal years, and after the events of the third task, Pansy hadn't brought it up again, but they hadn't exactly broken up. Actually, Draco wasn't sure that they were even still friends. He'd been blowing her off all year.

He only dwelled on it for a moment, dragging his thoughts back to the look on *Potter*'s face right before they kissed, he'd been egging Draco on, he'd been dragging Draco in. He'd convinced himself that *Potter* was the one to initiate their kiss long before he moved from the seat outside Dumbledore's office.

"Draco," Snape said, drawing Draco's attention away from his racing thoughts. "Come inside." He stood shakily, worried about facing the man he'd been instructed to kill, but it turned out he didn't have to do much talking. He was all but instructed on what would happen. He would let Death Eaters into the castle after Regulus fixed the cabinet and he would lead them up to the Astronomy Tower.

"I'm betraying the Dark Lord by doing this," Draco said dully.

"You've already betrayed him by telling me your plan," Regulus said. Draco flinched slightly, though he supposed he already knew that, it was different hearing it said out loud.

"What will happen to my parents?" he whispered. He thought of his father laughing while *Potter* was tortured, should Draco be working this hard for him? He shook his head faintly, he was still his father and it wasn't like he could just leave his mother helpless.

"Your parents have to make their own choices," Regulus said, his voice a bit more tender than it was a moment before.

"I'll do what I can to keep them safe."

"If all goes according to plan, Voldemort need not know you betrayed him."

Draco flinched so badly that he felt like he pulled a muscle in his neck. He vaguely heard Dumbledore describe the plan, the faked death, and everything, but mostly, he just felt like he was floating far above his body, in a place where none of this could hurt him.

"Why is this happening now?" Draco whispered. He almost thought no one would hear him, it seemed like no one did when none of them answered for a long few moments. When Dumbledore finally spoke, a grip of panic wrapped itself around his ribs.

“It’s obvious that you have a connection with Mister Potter,” Dumbledore said, his voice kind. “That connection puts you both in danger, but when understood, it could be a great asset to you.”

Draco didn’t know what that meant and no one else seemed willing to jump in and explain it for him, so he was just left wondering. Snape dismissed him after a while, Regulus squeezing his shoulder once and telling him to get some rest right before he headed out the door. He found *Potter* sitting in the same place he’d left him, Snape had already sent him away, so why was he still here?

“Are you planning on spending the night here?” Draco sneered, making *Potter*’s eyes shoot open. He was tired and cranky and he didn’t feel like talking to *Potter* again tonight, no matter how badly Potter wanted to kiss him.

“They haven’t told me I could go yet,” *Potter* mumbled, rubbing the side of his face. How long had he been out here?

“Snape said he’d told you you could leave,” Draco replied.

“Well, Snape lied,” *Potter* said snidely. He looked so angry, so furious, there was so much rage in his eyes that Draco couldn’t help but feel a bit stung by it.

“Why did you do it?” Draco asked suddenly, his voice quieter than it was a moment before.

“Why did I fall asleep?” *Potter* asked mockingly. “This might be a bit confusing for you, but people usually sleep because they’re tired.”

“No, you prick. Why did you kiss me?” Draco snapped.

Potter gasped. “I didn’t kiss you.”

“Excuse me?” Draco sneered.

“You kissed me,” *Potter* accused, pointing his finger accusingly at Draco’s face.

Draco laughed disbelievingly. He’d only kissed *Potter* because *Potter* wanted him to. “I definitely didn’t kiss you. I would kiss everyone else in this castle before I willingly kissed you.”

“Well, same here! I would rather kiss Neville’s toad than kiss you!” *Potter* shouted. Draco had never been so offended, but worse than that, the image of *Potter* and Neville kissing filled his head unbidden—it wasn’t even what *Potter* had said—and something awful twisted around his body, a coiled metal that threatened to spring.

“Then why—” Draco broke off with a frustrated growl. His vision was sharpening again.

“What’s wrong with you?” *Potter* asked softly. He almost sounded worried. Draco’s cheeks grew hot.

“That’s none of your business, Potter,” Draco snarled, then turned away, rubbing furiously at his face. His back was starting to hurt from standing for so long.

“Malfoy—” *Potter* reached out, putting his hand on his shoulder. Draco whipped around instantly, placing one hand roughly on *Potter*’s chest and shoving him against the wall.

“Don’t touch me!” Draco said through clenched teeth, the feel of *Potter* against him was intoxicating.

“Draco,” Snape’s voice interrupted once again. “I believe I told you to return to your dorm.”

Draco hurried away the moment his vision went back to normal. He couldn’t stay around *Potter* any longer, not if he was going to be acting like that. And honestly, why was the prospect, the very idea, of *Potter* kissing Longbottom of all people the thing that set him off? Draco barely thought about Longbottom anymore.

Draco barely remembered the night Dumbledore died. It all seemed like such a blur, only the appearance of James Potter, a man who’d been murdered over a decade prior, really stood out to Draco. He’d been captured by the man, or at least that’s how it felt in the moment, and when Draco had seen his face—so similar to *Potter*’s just older and more chiseled—Draco had thought he might have been hallucinating.

The entire night made him feel so gutted, listening to Snape kill Dumbledore before carelessly telling them all to leave Draco’s corpse. His fake corpse, he reminded himself, though that hardly made any of it better.

James was an odd spot of warmth during a terrible night. His parents would think he was dead, he had nothing to go back to, for all that it mattered, he practically was dead. Only James Potter, recently revived it turned out, making him a muggle dish, the first food that Draco had eaten in days, kept him going.

He sat next to Draco while he ate, just close enough that Draco could sense the body heat coming off of him. It was like James was the only thing that was tying him to the earth. He usually wouldn’t trust a stranger like that, but Regulus trusted James and Draco trusted Regulus. And, embarrassingly, James had the kind of energy that made Draco feel like nothing else bad could happen to him.

They abandoned him at the manor though. James *and* Regulus. They’d just left him there. They’d hidden him there all summer, coming to visit periodically but leaving him feeling trapped and alone in an unfamiliar building. Black Manor, Regulus informed him. Draco didn’t care what it was called or whose family it belonged to.

He knew Sirius and Professor Lupin, *Remus*—he’d asked Draco to call him that—would be living with him, but he hadn’t thought about the fact that *Potter* might be joining them. Granger was there too, but her presence was far less insulting.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Regulus told Draco, whispering it as he pulled Draco in for a hug. Draco wasn’t used to being hugged, his mother had hugged him when he left for Hogwarts for the first time and never since. Draco couldn’t remember if that was his fault or not, if he’d been the reason she never hugged him.

“What if you never come back?” Draco asked, his voice catching slightly.

Regulus didn’t lie to him, he didn’t say that would never happen or that Draco was being ridiculous. Instead, he squeezed Draco very tightly to his chest and said, “You will always be taken care of. I promise.”

He was gone before Draco could fully process it and then Draco was alone, stuck in a place he didn’t recognize. Abandoned.

He’d expected to be left to his own devices once Regulus and James were gone—although James wasn’t even supposed to go, he was going to say with Draco, they’d *talked about it*—but to his surprise, Sirius, who’d been cold to Draco since his arrival, and Remus, who seemed to be more polite platitudes wearing a sweater than an actual person, wouldn’t leave him alone.

“Draco, have you eaten yet? I’ll leave some food out here for you,” Sirius sing-songed through the door.

“Draco, have you been to the library yet? Regulus told me that you liked to read,” Remus said gently.

“Draco, if you’re just throwing the food out the window without eating it, I *will* find out,” Sirius threatened jokingly.

“Draco, could you join us for breakfast?” Remus requested.

Honestly, the two of them were ridiculous and unstoppable. Draco was so miserable those first few weeks that he barely responded to them, and he did really throw some of his food out the window one day, though not because he didn’t want to eat it. There were a ton of seabirds flying near the cliffs and Draco wanted them to come closer, he’d thought the food would entice them. He hadn’t expected Sirius to find the discarded food.

Draco wasn’t going to go down to breakfast, but then he wondered if Remus would be disappointed in him, and that made him feel a bit sick to his stomach, so he trudged down the stairs to the dining room James had shown him, at sat at a table with Sirius, Remus, Granger, and *Potter*, who kept staring at him like Draco was going to start throwing curses across the table.

He might have if he didn’t have decorum.

“So, we know that you’ll be missing out on classes this year,” Remus said, once they’d started eating. He looked at each of them in turn as he talked, just as he had when he was a professor.

“Obviously,” Sirius added with a quiet smirk.

“But we don’t want to detract from your education just because you won’t be returning to Hogwarts,” Remus continued as if Sirius hadn’t spoken. “James was the one to suggest this though so if you dislike it, please blame him.”

“Remus and I have been divvying up the subjects and we’ve decided that in September, we’ll start holding classes for you three,” Sirius added. “That way you can still take your N.E.W.T.s at the end of the year. Hopefully, everything else will be cleared up by then, and you’ll need your N.E.W.T.s if you want to move on.”

“Are you asking us or telling us?” Draco asked, already knowing the answer. He didn’t want to seem rude, but he’d grown accustomed to his long days alone and he wasn’t looking forward to spending every day locked in a room with know-it-all-Granger and *Potter*.

“Well—” Remus started.

“Telling you,” Sirius interrupted, his voice stern. Draco couldn’t tell if Sirius hated him or not, his mood swings were impossible to follow and he seemed to change personality every other day. “You need to have some structure here. Classes will help us do that.”

“Very well,” Draco said, then left without asking to be excused. It was the rudest he dared to be. He thought he deserved to throw a little fit given what was being asked of him. He dreaded the classes the night before they began, but it turned out that they were just what he needed to break him out of his stupor.

He was taking every single course that Sirius and Remus offered and they filled up all of his time during the day, and nearly all of his free time given how much work they assigned him. He was grateful for the distraction, and honestly, he had a lot to catch up on given that he’d spent all of sixth year coasting, sure he would be murdered before he ever had to take another meaningful exam.

The real problem started when the nightly run-ins began. Since meeting the Dark Lord over a year before, Draco could no longer sleep without nightmares. They were usually manageable, just a slight annoyance, but some nights, he found himself pacing his room waiting for the anxiety under his skin to abate.

He went to the kitchen one night to make himself some tea, hoping it would calm him. That was the first night he ran into *Potter*, and worse than that, it was the first time he’d felt the impulse to shove *Potter* against the wall. It wasn’t like in the bathroom, this wasn’t a heat of the moment thing, it was a slow simmer in his belly, a burning flame that flicked up whenever *Potter* was near.

It was like he’d started wearing cologne or something, Draco couldn’t put his finger on it, but every time *Potter* entered a room, a peculiar and appealing scent would fill the space. He would have rather died than ask about it, but every single time he saw him, it got worse.

During classes, when someone else was in the room, Draco had an easier time ignoring it, but when he started catching himself climbing out of bed in a daze, wandering the halls of the

manor without realizing it, and inevitably running to an equally sleepless *Potter*, it was like the scent filled up all the space around him. It was like the only thing he could smell.

Thinking back, he should have been more concerned about the fact that the little nudging inside his head—the one that used to tell him to run after *Potter*, to dive into the Black Lake after him during the second task—was starting to get startlingly specific with its demands.

One night he found himself dragging out a snack and a blanket for *Potter* as he sat stargazing. Draco couldn't say why he'd done it, and honestly, it was done before he'd thought to question it, or consider that he might look insane. No, he just followed along, dropping the muffins and a charmed wool blanket next to him without a thought.

During the day, Draco started studying with Granger. It was an unexpected development, but not completely unwanted. Granger was quieter than most of his friends back at Hogwarts, actually, she reminded him a bit of Theo and though Draco had viciously disliked her in the past, he now found her presence next to him oddly comforting. Not to mention that she was always willing to help him find the answer to any of his questions about classes, and that was far better than it had been trying to study near Crabbe and Goyle.

Although, he did miss his friends, far more than he would have expected. He'd grown apart from them in his sixth year, pushing them away when they started to pay too much attention, or because Regulus told him it wasn't a good idea to keep them around. Crabbe and Goyle had been the easiest, they'd taken up some odd friendship with Loo—Luna Lovegood, one he didn't understand at all, but it kept them away. Pansy, Theo, and Blaise were harder, but Draco was such a miserable sod that eventually they all stopped trying.

He missed them now, and when he was alone each night, he wondered if they missed him too. Were they sad that he died? Did they mourn him? Did they even care?

He'd gone to bed one night worrying about what Pansy must think of him. He must seem pathetic to her now, dying while trying, and failing, to help the Dark Lord. He had a stressful dream about getting lost in the dungeons of Hogwarts, it was a real maze down there and he'd actually gotten lost more than once in his first year, though he didn't tell anyone about it. He woke in the dark.

He heard a shout and then, "What do you think you're doing?"

Someone shoved him to the ground, and when he collided with the cold, hard floor, he cried out in shock.

"What was that for?" he asked unhappily.

"Why'd you sneak up on me?" *Potter* snapped. Of course, it was *Potter*. Draco should have known.

"I didn't—I didn't mean to. Where are we?" he asked, taking in the dark walls around him.

"What do you mean where are we? You're the one that followed me down here."

Draco glared up at the irate boy. It wasn't his fault, didn't anyone care about that? Didn't anyone notice?

"You shouldn't be down here," Draco said after jumping to his feet.

"Why not?"

"Because it's danger—" His words decayed on his tongue when his eyes settled on the pale body right behind *Potter's* slightly shorter frame. Bile crawled up his throat so fast that it burned. "Mother?" he whispered. He shoved Harry to the side, gently so as not to hurt him, and fell to his knees. His mother. She was dead. How could this have happened? Snape said he'd try to keep her safe. He said he'd try.

"*Riddikulus*," Harry whispered behind him.

Narcissa began to shift, her body losing its form as she turned into a bed of flowers, beautiful and cruel, a haunting image that made Draco want to tear his fingernails into the dirt and dig his mother up to the world of the living.

"Come on," Harry said, his voice deceptively gentle, calming. He dragged Draco from his mother's grave, through the dark hallways, until they climbed through the cellar doors back into Black Manor and a sense of reality returned to him. It wasn't his mother, that spell was for boggarts, his mother wasn't here, she wasn't dead. She *hopefully* wasn't dead.

"Are you okay?" *Potter* asked. Draco had forgotten he was there, he'd forgotten who *Potter* was, who they were to each other. He ran before *Potter* could see any more of his tears and he stayed locked in his room for more than a week.

He charmed the door shut every night and he refused to let himself wander, and during the day, he refused to go to classes. He expected that Sirius or Remus would be upset, but instead, both of them started stopping by his room in the late afternoon to go over all of his classwork. It was more than he deserved, but he appreciated it and the reprieve from *Potter* was nice.

After a few days, the knots in his chest began to loosen, and after a while, he unlocked the door, a silent admission that he knew what might come and that he wouldn't stop it. He barely had control of himself, he hadn't in years, not really. Why fight it now?

"Sirius?" *Potter* called one night. Draco was half awake for that search, his feet carrying him through the manor like only half of his body was possessed.

"Potter," Draco greeted.

"You're back," *Potter* breathed, he almost sounded relieved. His face dropped into a hard expression suddenly. "I mean, what are you doing out here?"

"Are we going to do this every time?" Draco asked with a sigh.

"That depends, are you ever going to answer?" *Potter* said. He sounded small, a little helpless. Draco didn't like the way that sound affected him.

“I don’t have an answer for you,” he admitted.

“What do you mean?” *Potter* asked, taking one step toward him.

“I don’t know why I’m here.”

“What?” *Potter* asked. “But why were you following me all those other nights?”

Draco didn’t see any more reason to lie. “I don’t know why I was following you,” he confessed.

Potter gasped, taking another step forward. “But you admit you were following me?”

Draco frowned. “Yes,” he said. *Potter* took another step forward. “I was following you.”

“But—” *Potter* took another two steps forward and suddenly he was nose to nose with Draco. Draco didn’t move away, only looked down at Harry with a raised eyebrow, a question. What makes you walk towards me? What draws you in? It almost didn’t seem like him asking, and for the first time in a while, that thought scared him.

“Do you think you could try and sleep? This is really getting exhausting,” Draco said.

“What?” *Potter* whispered.

“Just—just try to get some sleep.”

Christmas came without any real update from Regulus. He wondered if his parents would celebrate, would they mourn him all over again? He ached for them, and he expected to spend the day wallowing in his grief, but then Sirius called him downstairs and while handing out gifts, gave Draco a tiara his mother had played with a child.

Draco had to excuse himself and when Sirius followed him up to his room talking about all the ways Narcissa played with her sisters and Regulus when they were kids, Draco broke down in his arms.

It wasn’t his finest moment, he was sure he’d be embarrassed about it later, but Sirius didn’t mock him, he held him tightly to his chest like Regulus would have and he let Draco make a mess of his coat, tears and snot running inelegantly down his face. He missed his parents, he missed his *mother*, he missed so much of his life. He hadn’t even noticed how it was being taken from him, dripping out of him like an unhealed wound.

“She’d be happy to know Regulus was protecting you,” Sirius whispered to him, speaking the words like a confession, a gentle thing. “She always loved Regulus the most, probably more than she loved her sisters. You’ll see her again, I’m sure of it.”

By the time Sirius left, Draco felt cried out, his eyes aching from shedding so many tears, and then, like the pattering of rain, *the pattering of fate*, a gentle knock came from his door.

“Potter,” he greeted, only a little surprised. “What do you want?” his voice broke, the tears he’d thought were over still simmered under the surface like a threat.

“Have you been crying?” *Potter* asked. Draco wanted to punch him.

“What. Do. You. Want?”

“I just—I was worried when you didn’t come back. It’s—it’s Christmas, no one should be alone on Christmas.” Draco stared at him for a long moment, and then because he couldn’t bear to stand any longer, he left the door open, and walked away, back to where he was sitting in front of the fire.

“What did—what’s wrong?” *Potter* asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Draco said. He pulled his knees against his chest after he sat down. “Aren’t you going to sit down?”

“Oh, right,” *Potter* mumbled awkwardly. He sat as far away on the couch as he could manage, Draco tried not to take offense, that *scent* filling his nose already.

“Sirius gave me something,” Draco said just to fill the silence. “It belonged to my mother.”

“Narcissa?” *Potter* asked. Draco nodded. “What did he give you?” Draco pointed to the gift packaging sitting on the table in front of them.

“A crown?” he asked.

“Yes, apparently it was a gift from my grandmother to my mother when she was young. She used to wear it while she played. She left it at Grimmauld Place when she was a teenager. Sirius had been holding onto it, I guess.”

“Wow,” *Potter* said. “It looks real.”

“It is real,” Draco said questioningly. “Why wouldn’t it be real?”

“No, I mean it looks like real jewels,” *Potter* said, dragging his eyes away from the tiara.

“It is,” Draco said. Had *Potter* hit his head recently?

Potter’s mouth dropped open. “Only your family would play with real diamonds in childhood.” Draco laughed in surprise. *Potter*’s words were almost... friendly.

“It’s practically your family too.”

“Huh?” *Potter* asked.

“Regulus is basically your dad. He buys all your clothes and everything,” Draco said. It was a guess more than anything, but he’d seen the way *Potter* dressed in the first couple of months at Hogwarts and he could only imagine who’d improved his wardrobe. Draco knew it couldn’t have been Weasley or Granger.

Potter scoffed. "Please, please, do not refer to it as 'my family too.'"

"Why not?" Draco asked, wondering if he was about to be insulted. *Potter* threw his hands out.

"Because that would make us," he gestured between them, "family and we—we—we—"

Slowly, a knowing smirk stretched across his face. For months they'd been running into each other. Draco had thought *Potter* had forgotten everything, that he'd forced himself to forget.

"We what, *Potter*?" Draco said. He felt more than saw a shiver rush through *Potter's* body, it seemed to disturb the air around them like a rock tossed into a pond.

"Nothing," *Potter* grumbled.

"No, no, you're the one that wanted to talk," Draco said in a sing-song voice.

Potter jumped to his feet, startling them both. Draco felt darkness cloud over his eyes.

"Relax, I'm only joking," he said with a defeated sigh.

"We could do it again," *Potter* whispered. Draco's head snapped toward him, his eyes widening.

"What did you just say?" His voice sounded a bit weird, like it had that one day they went to the Ministry.

Potter shrugged one shoulder. "We could do it again," he said, only a little louder.

Draco's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"I'm—I mean, no, but why?"

"Forget it!" *Potter* said, moving like he was going to leave. Possessive hunger swam through Draco's veins and he jumped to his feet, stopping Harry before he could go.

"Don't leave," he said, his voice metallic and layered. It was disturbing to his ears, and yet he dismissed it immediately. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes," Harry whispered.

Kissing *Potter* was like trying to wrestle the other part of himself while trying to wrangle an Abraxan. He could feel it creeping up from the depths of his mind and body, trying to take control of all of his limbs, his fingers, *his lips*. It was exciting and alluring and all-encompassing. *Potter's* lips were warm and uncoordinated, his hands were fumbling and awkward, his body stiff every time, his muscles strained like he didn't want to give too much of himself away. Draco need only dig his fingers into the muscles of *Potter's* back to make him loosen, to make him pliable. It made dark thoughts swim in his head, and when he was

alone, he played out each of those thoughts in detail, he chased them until he was swallowed whole.

But *Potter* kept calling him back and one night, after the Snitch Dumbledore had given *Potter* opened, *Potter* pulled him close, his lips more fevered than usual, hungrier, like he was trying to pull something from Draco that Draco had been withholding from him. They collapsed onto the bed and Draco finally felt the hard length of him pressing into his hip, they dragged their bodies together until they were both sweaty and panty with release.

Draco hadn't felt his thoughts white out like that in a long time, but when he came, it was like all the worries stringing him together disappeared.

Unfortunately, that seemed to let out something he wasn't prepared to deal with. It was the other part of himself, he recognized the feel of him now, but it wasn't like it was before, it wasn't a slow filling of his lungs and his limbs, it was like an animal let out of its cage, freed finally from its shackles and Draco's body reacted, all of his muscles contracting painfully, his throat closing, his vision blurring and sharpening, back and forth until he couldn't make out anything.

Harry tried to speak to him. *Harry* was reaching for him, and the other version of himself, the one that wanted to grasp back, to dig his nails in and claim, felt uncontrollable.

Draco ran.

He charmed his bedroom door locked and silenced the walls using a spell Snape had taught him. He wanted to vomit or scream or *die*. He wasn't sure which or in what order, all he knew was that no one could see him like this. No one could help him either. Draco was all alone.

Something was cracking open his ribs, tearing his spine in two. Hands and fingers speared through him like an illness, grasping at the strings of his sanity. Nausea swept through his body, but though he was bent over the sink, no vomit came. He wished it would though he detested vomiting. At least that might bring some relief.

He coughed and begged and cried and, finally, when the pain became too much, he screamed.

Chaos pulled at his veins, playing him like a harp, possessing him. He shivered on the bathroom floor, the cold beneath his cheek the only thing that kept him from falling into mayhem. The sweat along his overheated skin kept him from losing himself.

The cloudy night sky outside his bathroom window mocked him. A storm brewing, an easy relief. Draco could access none of it.

When dawn finally lit up the clouds in broad paint strokes of pink, purple, and red, Draco was sure he was minutes from death. His mouth tasted like cotton, his body ached, his skin itched and irritated, his stomach twisted over and over itself like a dog chasing its tail. There was knocking, pounding, rapping, *hammering* from the back of his skull, shaking his eyes

with every beat. His head throbbed, his vision blurred from tears or death or whatever monster had come to live in his skin.

Draco didn't even have the energy to beg anymore, he was a shell, hollowed out for the monster to take hold.

“Draco, Draco, Draco,” the monster taunted. Its voice echoed and cracked, urging him to ascend from his stupor and fight for his life. Draco didn't think he wanted his life if this was what it meant to live it.

“Draco, Draco, Draco,” the monster sang. Draco squeezed his eyes closed. Just take me, he thought. Just let me die, let me lose, let me go. The monster clamped its claws around his arms, behind his head, around his legs. Draco screamed in pain, surprised that he still had the energy to make such a noise.

“Draco, Draco, Draco,” the monster adjured, its voice full of sorrow. Draco wanted to soothe it. The monster couldn't pick what it was, the monster didn't get to decide. Draco knew that better than most.

Icy, cold water sprayed him, his skin screeching with rejection. He gasped and clawed to get free, but the monster held him still, dragged him underwater.

“It's okay,” the monster urged. “Breathe, Draco. Just breathe.” The monster ached for him, only it wasn't a monster at all. It was Remus, his warm hands holding Draco below the shower spray.

“I'm drowning,” Draco gasped.

“You're not,” Remus said steadily. “The water is only on your chest. You're all right, but you're overheating. We have to lower your body temperature.”

“It's cold,” Draco whined, but thankfully his body gave up the fight and he felt all of his muscles untense for the first time in hours. He would have fallen flat on his back had Remus not been there to hold him up. Remus must have been getting soaked by the water as well, but he didn't complain. “When did I take my shirt off?” Draco mumbled. The water was definitely hitting his bare chest, it might have been hitting lower too. He didn't want to know.

“I don't know,” Remus said. “But you made sure you couldn't put it back on.”

Draco's mind felt sluggish, it felt like understanding was just out of reach, just beyond where his fingertips reached. “What?” he whispered.

Remus laughed, a short noise through his nose, then said, “I'll explain in a minute. Are you ready to get out?”

Draco tried to nod but his head felt impossibly heavy. Remus must have understood him though because he dragged Draco out of the cold shower and wrapped his shivering body in a towel. He knew his feet were under him but he couldn't feel them, or his ankles, or his knees,

or his thighs. He barely even realized that he was collapsing until Remus caught him, holding him against his chest before maneuvering him out of the bathroom.

His vision turned black while he shuffled along, his feet dragging along the floor. He felt like he'd been exsanguinated.

When he opened his eyes next, he was in bed, his blankets pulled up against his chin. He was dressed again, wearing a silky pair of pajamas that soothed his irritated skin. The room was impossibly bright, the sun must have finally fought through the clouds. He had sheer, white curtains pulled over his windows, but they seemed to spread the sunlight more than hinder it.

"Draco, can you hear me?" Remus's voice sounded it muffled like Draco had cotton stuffed in his ears. His eyes hurt as he dragged them over to see Remus bent over the bed, his hand against Draco's forehead.

"Am I dying?" Draco whispered.

"No, I don't believe so," Remus said with a frown. "Draco, what happened? Why did you lock the door? You could have been seriously injured."

Draco blinked at him. That was too many questions. He wasn't sure his brain could answer a single one.

"I don't know."

Remus's eyebrows furrowed even deeper than they already were. He looked odd, different, but it took a moment for Draco to put his finger on why. It wasn't that he spent a lot of time looking at Remus Lupin, not like when he was a third year and was experiencing his first, *and most embarrassing*, crush—Draco could barely believe he was finally admitting that to himself—but Draco was still certain that he knew what the man looked like.

Finally, it dawned on him. "Why are your eyes like that?" Draco said, his voice was raspy from screaming.

"Like what?"

Draco tried not to flinch away from him. That would be rude, and he knew what Remus was. Everyone knew thanks to Snape. He did not want to offend a werewolf, no matter how nice he pretended to be.

"I don't know," Draco mumbled. "Forget I said anything."

Remus stared down at him unblinking for long enough that the hairs on his arms started to stand up. "I think my... wolf is reacting to you," he finally said, his face paling as he said it. He seemed to be just as embarrassed as Draco felt hearing it.

"Why?" Draco whispered. He tried to remember what was happening before but it all felt like fog, just as it had so many times before. "Was I naked before?" he blurted then turned away so he wouldn't have to see Remus react.

“It’s common for someone going through an inheritance to shed their clothes,” Remus said kindly. He’d clearly meant for his words to soothe, but they had the opposite effect. Draco’s heart rate spiked.

“A *what?*” he asked, sitting up in bed. It was only then that he realized how much physical pain he was in. Every movement was torture and his back, *his back*, felt like it had been torn open. “Ah!” he cried, biting down hard on his bottom lip to keep from crying out anymore.

“Try not to move,” Remus said stupidly. It was a bit late for that.

“What did you say?” Draco asked through his teeth. Remus leaned away from him, a mildly confused look passing over his face.

“An inheritance. Did you not know?”

“No, I don’t know that. What are you talking about?” Draco snapped harshly.

“Draco, calm down,” Remus said. He sounded so unsteady, he sounded *nervous*. Something inside him snapped, it wanted to dig its teeth in and rip and tear. A noise he’d never heard came out of his mouth, Remus backed up several steps, his hands up in front of him. His eyes glowed golden, brighter than Draco had ever seen.

It was like he was possessed all over again, beyond reasonable thinking, beyond everything. He lunged off the bed, springing from it with a dexterity that his younger self would have fought tooth and nail for. He threw himself at Remus, digging his nails into his chest and slamming him against the wall.

“Draco, no!” Remus cried. He didn’t sound afraid, he only sounded worried, but all that did was fill Draco with rage. He’d never felt so much rage. His mind could only think *kill, fight, survive, win*. Brutal magic crackled from Remus’s palms, white and glowing like the moon, hitting Draco square in the chest and throwing him backward so roughly that he collided with the bed.

“What?” Draco breathed. He felt a sharp pain in his side like his ribs were broken.

“I’m sorry. Oh, no, I’m so sorry.”

It took Draco a few moments to regain his breath, but it was enough time for the possession and rage to recede, his normal thoughts returning.

“What is happening to me?”

“You’re—” Remus cringed like he couldn’t bring himself to say it.

Draco thought of the family book, the one he hadn’t wanted to revisit. The name that hadn’t been in the pureblood ring of names, the one that was a little too similar to the French names of the Veela he’d read stories about as a child.

“I’m part Veela,” Draco confessed, a sob quickly following the words. Remus took a tentative step forward.

“You’re more than part,” Remus said like he was delivering bad news.

Draco shook his head and collapsed onto the bed.

“It was several generations back,” Draco said.

“Okay,” Remus said, walking the rest of the way to the bed when it was clear Draco wasn’t going to attack him again. “I don’t know much about Veela, but there have to be some books on it here. I’ll find them. Do you know what may have triggered this?”

Draco squeezed his eyes closed, his face flushing violently. “Yes,” he whispered, “but I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Draco,” Remus warned, “this will likely get worse before it gets better.”

“Why can’t it just go away?” Draco asked. “I don’t want this. I never wanted this.” Tears fell from his closed eyes, seeping down the side of his head.

“Draco,” Remus whispered, he was close now, his hand resting on Draco’s chest like he was following his breathing, testing his heart rate. “How did this happen?”

Draco swallowed harshly, his throat hurt. He could feel the Veela under his skin now, he couldn’t sense where he ended and it began. Fear swam through his mind, threatening to take him, to drown him.

“It was Harry,” he said. “It was always Harry.”

Chapter End Notes

so yes, this chapter is like four times as long as every other chapter in this fic, but i wanted to include it all together. this chapter made me fight for my life, so if you see mistakes, no you don't.

it's a little creature fic-ish at the end there, i hope you were all prepared :)

the justice.

Chapter Notes

it's sickly sweet and a little soft.
also, there's gore towards the end.
enjoy :)

Draco slipped back into a fitful sleep after Remus forced him to drink some water. Remus was afraid he might die of dehydration if he didn't get something into his system, his body temperature had been dangerously high by the time Remus was able to break through the locking charms Draco had encrusted his bedroom door with.

Even his magic felt different, Remus realized once he had a moment to himself. Remus had always been sensitive to magic, Sirius said he had a deeper understanding of it because he was a talented wizard, but Remus was pretty sure it was just because he was a werewolf. There was something to be said for being a dangerous creature, it made him interact with every bit of the world differently than he would otherwise.

Draco's magic had always felt featherlight, like most children's, it barely made an impact, even when he was trying his hardest, but now it burned, it stung a bit. His magic felt like lightning striking the earth, like cold diamonds breaking across his skin. It was sharp and fierce, and it had a very peculiar smell, one that he couldn't get out of his nose, even after he left Draco's bedroom.

He locked the door behind him, a simple spell that wouldn't allow anyone else in or out. He didn't intend to keep Draco prisoner, he would never want to do that, but until they knew more about Draco's inheritance, Remus couldn't let him roam free. He seemed only partially in control of himself and given the way he'd tried to attack Remus, he wasn't exactly safe to be around.

His and Sirius's bedroom wasn't far from Draco's, and Remus was grateful that he didn't run into anyone on his way there. His heart was pounding, his breathing constricted, as worry and panic set in.

They were isolated from the world in the manor, but that didn't mean life's problems couldn't touch them. A creature inheritance was exceptionally rare. Remus had never met anyone who'd gone through one, but from his limited knowledge, he knew they were dangerous. In some cases, especially ones where the person was unaware of what was happening to them, they were deadly.

Remus had known it was creature-related the moment he entered Draco's bedroom, but he was strangely relieved when Draco seemed to at least know *which* creature he was turning

into.

“Moony.” Sirius’s voice drifted into his ears, a soothing balm on Remus’s cracked skin. They fit together so perfectly, they had before, in a way, but now, it was as seamless as if they were one person. Sirius’s hand landed on the back of his neck, his fingers lightly massaging the tensed muscles there, and Remus blew out a sigh of relief, stability returning to him as soon as Sirius was present. “What’s wrong?” Sirius’s voice was deep, a low whisper delivered right to Remus’s ear.

Remus shivered slightly, turning to press a swift, close-mouthed kiss against Sirius’s lips.

“Is Draco all right?” Sirius asked just as Remus pulled away.

“He’s alive,” Remus said.

Sirius paused, his hand freezing for a second before he continued his ministrations. “That’s good,” Sirius said slowly. “I wasn’t aware that was a concern here.”

“It might be,” Remus admitted. Sirius looked worried, but there was a bemused and lightly entertained smile on his lips. “What did Harry say?”

Sirius’s face split into a grin. “They’ve been fiddling each other,” he said conspiratorially.

Remus cringed in disgust. “Oh, gross, don’t say it like that,” Remus said, his chiding ruined by the laughter spilling out of him.

Sirius shrugged, his grin turning smug. “I told you,” Sirius said.

“Yes, well, I never disagreed that that might be going on,” Remus replied, shaking his head fondly.

“If you’d let me set a bet, I would have won.”

“Exactly why I never agreed to one,” Remus muttered. “How long has it been going on?”

“Since Christmas, or so Harry says. Merlin, I’ve never seen that kid look that mortified.”

“It’s an awkward thing to discuss, especially with your godfather.”

“I guess,” Sirius said. He almost sounded disappointed.

“But he told you,” Remus soothed. “That’s good.”

“It is,” Sirius agreed. He looked away, a small strain of stress peeking up around his eyes.

“What is it?”

Sirius shook his head, pacing over toward the window and placing his hands on his hips as he gazed out over the property. “Those muggles really messed him up, I think,” Sirius mumbled,

sounding distant. “He didn’t say anything, but it’s obvious he’s embarrassed about this and not just because he and Draco have hated each other for years.”

“You think he feels guilty?” Remus asked, moving forward to stand next to his husband. He brushed the back of their hands together gently, letting Sirius reach out and intertwine their fingers.

“Yeah, I do,” Sirius said assuredly. “I’ll have to talk with him more about it, later though when he’s not feeling so hunted.”

“Where is he now?”

“Outside with Hermione. They decided to walk the grounds while the weather was clear. I’m sure the rain will pick back up in a few hours.”

Remus nodded faintly, inspecting the rolling clouds that moved above them. It was bitterly cold outside, the winter air like a punishment, but it was nice to have a break from the constant rain.

“Are you calm enough to tell me about Draco now?” Sirius asked, watching Remus out of the corner of his eye. Remus sighed through his teeth, his muscles tensing up again. He’d momentarily forgotten what they were faced with, caught up in the complicated feelings of a queer teenager. Those seemed so simple in comparison.

“He’s Veela,” Remus whispered. Sirius didn’t respond right away, he stared at Remus blankly like he didn’t understand the words.

Finally, he said, “Sorry?”

“He’s Veela, I’m guessing on his father’s side.”

“I don’t—I’m not sure what that means,” Sirius confessed finally.

“What do you know about Veela?”

Sirius shrugged. “Not much. I thought...” he trailed off, looking mildly confused and a little ashamed.

“What?”

“I thought only women could be Veela.”

“Oh,” Remus said, “yes, that’s more common. I’ve only ever met a female Veela, but it’s possible for males to exist. I think—and don’t quote me on this—but I’m pretty sure males just carry the gene.”

“Then how does that affect Draco?”

“I guess they can turn into the... full thing, so to speak. I’m not completely sure. Draco doesn’t know much, and I’ve only read about them a few times. They’re very private I think.

We'll have to find some information about them though."

Sirius squeezed his hand comfortingly, watching Remus silently for a long couple of minutes. Remus was turning over what he knew about Veela in his head, spinning it around until he could see all the places where information was missing.

"What's happening to him now?"

Remus gnawed on his bottom lip before answering. "He has a fever, that's my main concern right now, but he's... changing, I'm not sure how to describe it. It's like when I turn on the full moon, but gradually and less intense. He still looks like himself for the most part, but his face looks sharp and, I don't want to say animal-like, that seems rude, but it's almost like... well, a bird, I guess. A really scary bird that wants to peck your eyes out."

"Don't hold back now," Sirius mumbled. Remus gave him a pained smile, but Sirius was just watching him intently, there was no judgment on his face.

"He attacked me, but I don't think he meant to. I was able to fend him off, or—" he cringed, "Moony was able to."

Sirius's eyebrows shot up. "Moony?"

"I was reacting to him," Remus whispered, ashamed. "Moony was, at least. I could feel him right under my skin like the night before the full moon. You know, like when I'm—"

"Oh trust me," Sirius said, a hungry smile spreading across his mouth. "I know."

Remus groaned quietly, faintly embarrassed. "It's like both of our... creatures, I guess, were reacting to each other."

"Wow," Sirius said quietly. "I didn't know that was possible."

"Neither did I," Remus confessed. "I've never experienced anything like it. When I interact with other werewolves, sometimes I can't even tell that they're infected. It's only if they're brand new or feeling emotionally charged." Sirius frowned in confusion. "Like if they're angry," he clarified.

"Huh," Sirius said thoughtfully. "So, what now?"

"I need to do some research. For now, we just need to keep him safe and separate from everyone else."

"You think he'd hurt someone?"

"Not on purpose," Remus said. "It's not his fault."

"I never said it was," Sirius chided lightly. "How are we going to do research?"

Remus softened. He hadn't realized how defensive he'd felt, but that simple switch from 'I' to 'we' was enough to make him drop his walls. "I'm not sure. Do you think there will be

books in the library here?”

“It’s possible,” Sirius said with a shrug, “but most pureblood families avoid studying magical creatures. It’s not really considered part of high society. Speaking of which, how does Draco have Veela blood? Someone in the Malfoy line?”

“Yeah,” Remus said. “Draco said it was someone a few generations back. I guess the Malfoys aren’t as pureblood as they thought they were.”

Sirius snickered. “Be a shame if this news got out.”

“Hush,” Remus said, though he was laughing too. “And don’t let Draco hear you mocking him like that. I doubt he’d find it funny.”

“I won’t, I won’t,” Sirius said dismissively. “Besides, I’ve been very accepting of him so far. I think I deserve a little credit.”

“Yes, you’re a pillar of magnanimity.” He shook his head as he said it but he couldn’t fight his smile. “Do you think Regulus knew about this?” Remus wondered.

“I doubt it, at least not the details. I’m sure he would have told us otherwise.” He paused. “He did say something...” Sirius said, looking away like he was trying to remember.

“Yeah?”

“He said that Draco had a connection to Harry. I thought he was being metaphorical though.”

“Metaphorical?”

“Yeah, like, Draco has major gay feelings for Harry and they’re so intense that they seemed magical in nature.”

“You thought he was a magical gay?” Remus asked, folding his lips in to keep himself from laughing. Sirius flushed slightly. “Did you come up with that idea from personal experience or...”

“Bugger off,” Sirius snapped, no heat behind his words. “It’s Regulus’s fault for not explaining.”

“I’m pretty sure Regulus thought you and Draco were going to be at each others’ throats once he left, I’m sure he was just trying to keep Draco safe.”

“All of you have such a low opinion of me,” Sirius huffed. “I am an adult, I know how to behave myself.”

“So you claim...”

Sirius rolled his eyes, his cheeks still pink. Remus wanted to dig his teeth into them, if it had been closer to the full moon, he might have done so. “Do you know what caused the Veela transformation?” Sirius asked. “Is it a coming-of-age thing?”

Remus really did laugh then, though he felt a bit guilty about it. Draco had told him with such a tone of defeat that Remus had felt nothing but pity, but now that he wasn't trapped in a room with a recently transformed Veela teenager, he could see how ironic it was. "It was because—how did you phrase it? He and Harry were *fiddling* each other."

The Black Manor library was less than helpful when it came to information about Veelas. There was one book about magical creatures written in the late 1800s that referenced them, but it didn't tell Remus anything he didn't already know. Veela traits usually appeared in females, males were so uncommon that most people believed they were myths, and Veela communities were *extremely* private when it came to their lives and deaths.

They'd been hunted and mistreated many times throughout history and had closed ranks a long time ago. Though they still left their communities and interacted with the world, they kept all the real secrets locked up tight.

That meant that Remus and Sirius, and in turn, Draco, were on their own. They would have to just wait and see what happened to him, and hopefully, be there to help him along the way.

The first night wasn't terrible. Sirius went into Draco's bedroom with him, the two of them carrying trays of food and tea, and they sat with Draco as he sleepily tried to eat. He wasn't able to get down much, his eyes kept sliding closed while he was chewing. It was like his body was too exhausted to even manage sitting up.

His face still held that overly sharp feature, the one that set Remus's teeth on edge, but Remus didn't feel Moony react the entire time, which he hoped meant Draco was recovering.

Harry and Hermione were understandably curious about what was happening to Draco, but Remus and Sirius agreed not to tell them anything until Draco could decide for himself what he wanted people to know. It was a very private thing, and Remus could sympathize with him. He didn't want to make him feel intruded upon. Harry especially seemed very distressed.

"He thinks it's his fault," Sirius confided in him. "He's worried that he hurt Draco or that Draco is disgusted by him."

"Oh, Harry," Remus replied with a sigh. "We really need to sit down and talk to him." Sirius nodded unhappily, frowning deeply.

Remus placed a few monitoring spells over the room when he left Draco that night. He wasn't lucid enough for Remus to explain that he was locking him in, so he used some of the spells he found in a parenting book that would let him know if Draco woke, cried out, or if his fever got worse.

Despite the monitoring spells, he went to bed feeling unsettled and worried. He kept waking up from nightmares about birds attacking the windows and breaking down the doors.

When the sun finally started to rise, he gave up on sleep altogether, pressing a soft kiss to Sirius's temple before climbing out of bed to go check on Draco. He unlocked the door and

entered the room quickly only to be immediately slammed into the wall.

“Why have you trapped me here?” Draco hissed. He seemed taller somehow, his eyes glowing in the dim light. His already sharp face seemed to morph dangerously, every angle of his body like knives on display.

“Draco, I haven’t—”

“You’re keeping him from me,” Draco growled, shoving Remus against the wall he was already pressed into. It knocked all the air out of his lungs, and for a worrying second, he thought he might have cracked a rib. He felt his magic swell at his fingertips, but he didn’t want to hurt Draco and he worried he might lose control.

He placed his hands over Draco’s own, Draco’s nails were beginning to dig into his chest, blood already trickling down his skin under his clothes, but Remus’s hands were gentle when they squeezed Draco’s.

“I’m just keeping him safe.”

Draco faltered, his nails resending and the anger on his face receding, confusion overtaking him. “I would never hurt him,” Draco whispered.

“Not on purpose,” Remus said. He felt like that was more than fair given that Draco had been Harry’s main antagonist at school. Still, Draco took it as an insult, clear by the way his nails dug a little deeper. Remus hissed in pain. He was starting to worry that he would have no choice but to throw Draco off of him with magic, but then Sirius swept into the room, the door still unlocked, and with a gentleness, Remus wouldn’t have expected given their position, he pulled Draco away.

“Come along, Draco,” Sirius said soothingly.

Draco looked bitterly at him, baring his teeth, but he went along with him, letting Sirius lead him back to his bed where he curled up into a tight little ball and promptly fell asleep. Remus slid down the wall slowly, his chest aching.

“Are you okay?” Sirius asked him, kneeling next to him on the floor.

Remus nodded. “He just took me by surprise. I didn’t think he’d be awake.”

“Did your spells not tell you?”

“No,” Remus said regretfully. “Maybe I did them wrong.”

“Or maybe they’re not meant to be used on a Veela.”

Remus shrugged, unsure what to think. He was just glad that Draco wasn’t hurt. They made breakfast standing with their sides pressed together and ate slowly with Harry and Hermione before going together to bring Draco his food.

“I don’t think either of us should go in alone until we’re sure he’s okay,” Sirius said. Remus agreed, though he wasn’t happy about it. He hated feeling like Draco was just another dangerous aspect of their life.

They decided to cancel classes for the time being. Neither Remus nor Sirius could focus on them when Draco was locked up alone suffering.

“Can I do anything to help?” Harry asked when Remus told him. He sounded so down on himself that Remus’s heart ached. Hermione was standing just behind Harry, a matching frown on her face, but her eyes kept sliding to Harry’s back. It was clear she wanted to ask what was going on, but she kept herself from voicing whatever was in her head. It was strange, Hermione was an excellent researcher and one of the brightest students Remus had ever taught, she likely would have been useful to them trying to figure out what to do to help Draco, yet he couldn’t tell her. He wouldn’t betray Draco like that.

“Just stick together,” Remus said because he couldn’t bear Harry being alone. “Sirius and I won’t be available for most of the day, but you can always send a patronus if you need us for anything. This might be a good time to practice your dueling, you never know when you’re going to need it.”

He realized a moment after he spoke how ominous his words sounded. He didn’t intend them to, he was only planning to give them a duel-based exam once they returned to classes, but Harry and Hermione shared a loaded look and Remus realized it was too late. He rushed away from them, leaving them to their own devices, and went to find Sirius.

The book they’d found in the library was open on his lap, his legs curled under him as he sat in the center of their bed. He glanced up for only a second when he heard Remus approach.

“Do you think I should go out and try to get more books?” Sirius asked.

“No,” Remus said quickly.

Sirius pursed his lips. “There weren’t any hiccups when I went to Gringotts. I think if I disguised myself I could probably make it in and out of a bookstore without being questioned.”

“No, Sirius, I said no.”

“He needs help, Remus,” Sirius argued. “I know—”

“No, you don’t know. I cannot just sit here wondering if you’ll come back, especially not with Draco how he is. If anything goes wrong, it’ll just be me here. We stay together.”

Sirius nodded slowly, he didn’t seem upset. He likely was expecting Remus’s reaction, though that didn’t stop Remus from feeling embarrassed about it.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. Sirius smiled softly.

“No need,” Sirius said, waving him off. He set the book to the side and motioned for Remus to come closer, Remus moved stiffly, his body strung tight with stress, but when he felt

Sirius's hands pull on his arms, dragging him onto his body in the bed, he finally relaxed. He tucked his face into Sirius's neck and let himself hide for a moment. "There is no guarantee that I would find anything anyway," Sirius said.

"If he dies, it will be my fault," Remus replied. Sirius's arms tightened.

"No, it won't be. He's not going to die, but even if by some tragedy, something happens, it wouldn't be your fault."

"I feel like I should be doing more for him," Remus said.

Sirius was quiet for a long time, his fingers ran through Remus's hair, gently pulling out any knots that he came across. He tapped his foot lightly against Remus's ankle, their legs intertwined. It felt like being nudged by a dog's wagging tail.

"Do you think this is how your mother felt?" Sirius asked.

"What?" Remus asked.

"When you were first bitten, do you think she worried that she wasn't doing enough for you?"

Remus swallowed harshly, his eyes burning. He hadn't thought about his mother in a long while, it always hurt him too much to think of her in detail. He pulled back so he and Sirius were nose to nose.

"I think she did," Remus admitted. "It was very hard on both of them, but she told me once that she felt powerless when I was really little. I didn't understand what was happening to me and she couldn't even be in the same room."

Sirius nodded slowly. "I can understand why she felt that way."

"Why do you ask?"

Sirius shrugged slightly. "It just sounded like something your mum would say," Sirius said.

Remus laughed softly. "You're probably right."

He let himself relax in Sirius's arms for a little over an hour, even managing to fall asleep for a few minutes, before both of them headed back to check on Draco. He was still sleeping, though it was late afternoon. He'd only eaten a fourth of what they'd brought him for breakfast, but all the water was gone which Remus hoped meant he'd drunk it.

They shook him awake gently, Remus feeling his forehead with the back of his hand. His fever was still raging, his skin so hot that he felt like he was burning.

"Here, get him to drink this," Sirius said, handing Remus a vial of purple liquid. "It'll lower his fever. Regulus used to have to take it as a child, he was very sickly."

Remus furrowed his eyebrows. "When did you make this?"

Sirius shrugged, but he was avoiding eye contact.

"Sirius?"

"During the summer," Sirius confessed, "when I still thought I would be leaving with Regulus. Just in case Regulus got sick again."

Remus, through self-determination and utilizing his years and years worth of self-control, did not laugh, but he really, *really* wanted to. "That was very sweet of you," Remus said carefully, using one hand to help a nearly delirious Draco sit up.

"Shut up," Sirius mumbled.

"Draco, will you drink this for me?" Remus asked gently. Draco nodded harshly like his head was too heavy for his neck to control, then opened his mouth so Remus could tip the potion into it. His fever lessened instantly and Draco began to shiver slightly, but once he had a blanket around his shoulders he seemed mostly calm.

"How are you feeling?" Sirius asked. They both sat on the bed on opposite sides of Draco, he was leaning up against the pillows and had pulled his legs up against his chest making him look very small and very young.

"Tired," he answered, blinking slowly a few times as if to prove it.

"Are you hungry at all?"

Draco shook his head.

"Any pain?"

Draco started to shake his head but then paused. "A little," he said. "Feels like I pulled the muscles in my back." He yawned right after he finished his sentence, his mouth opening so wide that his jaw popped.

"Do we have any pain relief potions?" Remus asked. Sirius shook his head.

"I'll brew some tonight. We used the rest after the last moon."

"We'll have some for you in the morning, okay?"

"That's fine," Draco said, his head tipping back dangerously. Remus wondered if he would fall back asleep again, but then he leaned forward, his overly bright eyes settling on Remus's face. "Why am I locked in?" He still sounded like himself, but there was something uncanny about it, as if someone else was talking through him.

"Because we need to make sure nothing happens to you or Hermione and Harry," Remus answered. Draco blinked at him, his eyes growing increasingly bright before the light in them faded slightly.

“Your spells won’t be able to keep me here forever,” Draco mumbled, his voice low and threatening, as he tipped back and really did fall asleep. He was snoring before his head hit the pillows behind him, but his words hung in the air.

“Okay, I’ll say it,” Sirius whispered. “He’s terrifying.”

Remus hated to agree, but he found himself nodding. They left to make dinner and spent a bit too long eating it. Sirius managed to get into an argument with Harry about Quidditch and Remus couldn’t bring himself to end it, especially once he and Hermione were nearly crying with laughter.

“Ron would love this,” Hermione said quietly to him.

“James would too,” Remus replied.

It was late in the evening by the time they made it back to Draco’s room and the moment they opened the door, he knew something was wrong. The room smelled overly sweet, like flowers and sugar boiling on the stove, but there was something harsh about it, something that burnt Remus’s nostrils.

“Draco,” he called.

Draco replied with a noise somewhere between a sob and a scream. They abandoned the dinner they’d brought for him and rushed into the bathroom. Draco was in the bathtub, dressed only in the pajama bottoms he’d worn to bed. He had the water running but the tub wasn’t stopped up, so no water was staying. He was curled forward, his back on display.

Remus immediately gasped upon seeing it. The muscles in his back looked malformed and strained, a few of them were shifting and moving like they had a mind of their own.

“Draco, what’s happening?” Sirius asked, kneeling next to the tub. Remus was quick to join him, but he couldn’t drag his eyes away from Draco’s back.

“It hurts,” Draco said through gritted teeth.

“Why are you in the bathtub?”

“I thought it would help,” Draco cried. He sounded so distressed that Remus’s hair stood on end.

“Help me get him out,” Remus said. “We can get him into dry clothes.” Sirius nodded and together they grabbed Draco—under his arms and around his middle—and pulled him out of the tub. Draco went willingly, clinging to them in desperation, but once he was out of the water, his body began to convulse so violently that they both lost their grip.

Remus had never felt so helpless. Draco didn’t appear to be able to hear them, and he couldn’t speak. His teeth kept clacking together loudly like he’d lost control of his jaw and his eyes were fully rolled back in his head.

“Does he have another fever?” Sirius asked. Remus used a spell to check, but for once his body temperature seemed normal. Whatever was happening to him, it wasn’t because of the fever. He flipped onto his back but his back arched so much that he curled up until only the very tip of his head was touching the ground, his hips fully lifting off the floor as his feet tried to keep him balanced.

“Don’t let him fall,” Remus rushed to say, both of them reaching out their arms to catch him once the arching stopped and Draco collapsed. He turned on his side as he fell, his front to Remus, and he immediately reached out to grasp him as tightly as he could. Remus could feel his nails again, but it wasn’t like before, it didn’t seem like Draco was trying to do damage.

“What is happening to me?” Draco whispered. Remus was just relieved to hear him speak.

“I don’t know,” Remus confessed.

“His back...” Sirius mumbled. Remus glanced up at him to find his eyes bulging in shock. Remus had to tilt Draco slightly to see what he was seeing, but when he did, he felt vaguely ill. It looked like two large blades were protruding from his skin, as if they were trying to cut him from the inside.

“What is that?” Remus asked.

He didn’t know if Sirius answered, he wouldn’t have been able to hear him either way, because just then, Draco began to scream, his voice like three voices layered on top of each other. Pain and terror clear as day. He held onto Remus like it was the only thing keeping him alive, but Remus could do nothing to help. All they could do was watch as the blades finally broke through his skin.

They shot out so quickly that Remus couldn’t see what they were at first, but when they stopped moving, he thought they looked like bloody organs. Sirius made a slight gagging sound and turned away, but Remus continued to stare, especially as Draco lost consciousness in his lap.

“What are *those*?” Sirius asked, gasping as he said it.

“I think—” Remus started to say as they began to move, finally shifting in a way where he could see them clearly. “I think they’re wings.”

the sight.

Chapter Notes

this chapter is a bit high concept, but i believe in you

Sometimes, Ron felt like he didn't belong in the world he lived in. It wasn't a constant feeling, but every once in a while, doubt would creep in and take root.

It happened for the first time when he was very young, maybe five or six, well before he attended Hogwarts. He was lying in the garden, enjoying the sunshine and hiding from Percy and his mother. His mum was on a rampage, deep cleaning the house. She was throwing out tasks for all of her children to complete, pointing at them the moment she spotted one of them, and sending them off with a long list of chores.

Ron was exhausted, he'd been helping all morning, and he was sick of it. Hence the hiding in the garden. He'd already de-gnomed it with his other brother, George, that morning so he was sure no one would come looking for him. However, it wasn't just his mother looking for him, Percy was also searching them all out. If his mum didn't catch him, Percy would, and he would drag Ron inside to help again.

He was keeping an ear out for either of them, but he hadn't heard much of anything. There was yelling happening somewhere on the other side of the burrow, it sounded like Charlie and their dad, but Ron couldn't be sure.

Just then, the sound of little feet padding along a dirt road hit his ear. He lifted his head surreptitiously, peaking out behind his orange hair to see Ginny come wheeling around the corner.

"Ron," she giggled.

"Shh," he hushed her playfully. She laughed harder but then pressed her lips together and pretended to lock them with a key before jumping forward and landing hard on top of his stomach. "Oof!"

"Are you hiding?" she whispered.

"I *was*," Ron responded, pushing her off of him so her knees wouldn't be digging into him. She rolled into the dirt next to him with another laugh. She was wearing a pair of his overalls, ones she'd stolen from his bedroom. Ginny did that a lot. She didn't like the dresses mum made for her, so she was always taking Ron's clothes. Ron didn't mind much, most of them were hand-me-downs from his older brothers anyway and he didn't really like them.

“Hush, hush,” Ginny said as if he was the loud one. He rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything, leaning back into the dirt so he could enjoy the sunshine a little longer. It was an unseasonably warm day, but Ron loved it.

Ginny was quiet, all he could hear was her breathing which slowly evened out as she lay next to him. He wondered if she was falling asleep just as he himself began to doze. A small ticking sound woke him. Just as he opened his eyes a loud boom went off beside him, followed by Ginny’s horrified and pained screaming. He jumped to his feet, spinning around to see Ginny sleeping peacefully in the dirt.

“Ginny,” he snapped. Her eyes opened as if she hadn’t been sleeping at all. “Come on!” He held out a hand, not offering an explanation, but Ginny took it without asking and he pulled her out of the garden just as the ticking began. He gripped her hand so hard that she winced, but when the ticking sound stopped, only a small puff of smoke exhaled from the garden.

“What’s that?” Ginny asked.

“I don’t—”

“Ugh, it didn’t work,” Fred said suddenly, making them both jump.

“What didn’t work?” Ginny asked.

“Nothing,” Fred said, frowning. George walked up behind him, they both must have been hiding in the trees right near the garden, staying just out of sight so Ron and Ginny couldn’t see them. George hurried forward and unearthed whatever they’d buried there, but Ron had stopped paying attention. He felt ill all of a sudden, the sound of Ginny’s pain screams still echoing in his ears.

Even as he tried to sleep that night, long after they’d been caught by Percy and made to clean for the rest of the afternoon, he couldn’t shake the feeling that Ginny was *meant* to get hurt that day, that someone Ron had done something he wasn’t supposed to, that he was *somewhere* he wasn’t supposed to be.

That feeling didn’t always linger. In fact, most of the time, he barely remembered feeling like that at all.

Learning that he was a seer clarified some things for him. It explained why he randomly felt that something was about to happen, why he was good at predicting how Fred and George’s pranks would play out, why he knew that Harry was going to follow Malfoy in the girls’ bathroom that one day.

Of course, he had no idea that they would both come out of it unscathed. They were in trouble for fighting, that’s what Harry said, but there was no bloodshed, no mayhem, no death. When he’d first seen them in there, Malfoy sobbing to Moaning Myrtle, Harry charging in with a spell that would cut Malfoy to ribbons, he thought there was no way they left without bloodshed. He heard Malfoy try to cast an Unforgivable, the words right on his tongue, and then he was bleeding out in the spilled sink water.

In some places, no world that Ron knew, he didn't survive that fight. That's why Ron had sent Regulus after them. If he couldn't stop the injury, he could at least stop the death. Not that he cared if Malfoy lived or died, it didn't matter either way, but he didn't want his friend to become a murderer. He knew how badly that would affect Harry. He'd probably also get thrown out of Hogwarts and that wouldn't have been ideal.

Ron had gone back to the dorm that night expecting Harry to come in looking defeated and horrified with himself, but instead, Harry didn't show up until late in the evening, a mortified look on his face.

"You okay, mate?" Ron asked worriedly. Regulus still wasn't back. Was he helping Malfoy?

"Fine, fine," Harry mumbled. He avoided eye contact so aggressively that for a moment, Ron thought the outcome was so much worse than he'd seen.

"Did you and Malfoy fight?" Ron asked carefully.

Harry cringed. "Something like that," he said under his breath.

"What?"

"Yeah," Harry said quickly. "We both have detention for a week for destroying the bathroom."

"Oh," Ron said, that didn't seem so bad to him. "But you're all right?" It would have been too suspicious if Ron had asked about Malfoy. He didn't want to explain what he'd seen if it hadn't actually played out that way. There were so many things he'd seen that he didn't want to talk about. He couldn't see any good coming from sharing that sort of information.

Harry, to his surprise, rolled his eyes. "I'm completely fine. Malfoy's a—" he shook his head. "I'm fine."

They didn't talk about it much after that, but Ron was able to infer that Malfoy hadn't been hurt, that it really had just been a fight. It struck Ron as odd though. What he'd seen—it had felt so real, he'd been certain parts of it would happen. It brought back that feeling, like he was in the wrong world, like he was experiencing things that weren't meant to be changed.

It bothered him for weeks afterward, so much that he started to lose sleep over it. He ultimately went to Firenze for help. He explained to the centaur how he was feeling. Firenze stared at him blankly, his knowing eyes growing distant.

"How odd," Firenze said finally.

"What's odd?"

Firenze had a habit of speaking in codes and riddles, and Ron was worried he wouldn't understand what he said.

"Perhaps those things were meant to happen," Firenze posited. "Perhaps they were nearly set in stone and impossible to change."

“I thought the future was always changing.”

“It is,” Firenze agreed. “Yet prophecies exist. The way they play out in the world is unpredictable, yet the prophecy remains true. Some events,” he paused, glancing away from Ron so that he could examine three books that lay open on the table, his eyes flitted over them rapidly before coming back to stare at Ron, “are meant to happen, yet that does not mean they cannot be changed.”

Ron waited for him to continue, but unfortunately, he was starting to look away again like he was already mentally moving on. “Can you explain further?” he asked. He found that that usually made Firenze more helpful. If he asked ‘What the bloody hell does that mean?’ Firenze would just smile placatingly and move on.

“The future is malleable, however, there are moments that rarely change, prophesied or lodestar moments. These moments have a point. They lead

“And what’s the point of Harry nearly killing Malfoy?”

Firenze smiled oddly. “I do not believe it is about the killing. I believe it is about the boys and what they mean to each other.”

Ron’s eyebrows furrowed. “What—I’m not sure I understand.”

“Messrs. Potter and Malfoy were not led to damaging each other. Their lodestar point was not near death, it was to shape what role play in each other’s story.” He paused, waiting for Ron to ask a question, but Ron wasn’t sure he understood what Firenze was saying well enough to ask much of anything. “Think on it Mr. Weasley. I believe you will understand eventually.”

Ron tried to make sense of it, but the concept seemed too confusing to him.

After the disquieting events of the summer and the dark return to Hogwarts, Ron didn’t have much time to think about the complex words from Firenze. At least not during the day. His days were filled with trying to navigate the new dangers school presented—Snape as their headmaster, Death Eaters as teachers and disciplinarians, and no Harry or Hermione to even out his days.

He spent most of his time talking to Neville and Ginny, two of the only people he truly trusted in the school. They tried to help others, to protect the younger years, but there was only so much they could do. Students kept getting hurt and after the Christmas holidays, some students never returned to school—Luna Lovegood included.

At night, when his stressed body was allowed to rest, his mind drifted and he *saw*. He jumped from place to place, seeing versions of himself that provided nothing to his life. When he was this worried, it was like his visions became useless. He couldn’t predict what would happen when Seamus was assigned detention, he didn’t see him coming back with wounds all over his face. Yet at night, he could see himself hiding in alleyways, fighting off wizards.

He always woke feeling tired, as if a piece of himself was staying awake just to watch the useless dealings of another Ron. Firenze wasn’t available for one-on-one meetings anymore

so Ron couldn't ask about them. He just had to let them come.

Ron was very close to fed up with the dreams by the time he encountered another lodestar point. He realized what it was immediately, it looked different than the other visions, crisper and louder. The noises from it rang in his ears for days afterward.

He saw himself with Hermione and Harry, discussions carried under regrets and helplessness, a lack of hope weighed down each other them, nearly visible to the naked eye.

And then there was Hermione, looking beautiful and striking and far too thin. "I think we need to talk to Xenophilius Lovegood." They went because she asked them to and because there were no other options, they stayed and listened and were attacked. Sometimes they made it out, but they never escaped for long.

He woke briefly. It must have been nearly three in the morning, snow pelted on the windows, making Ron feel claustrophobic. He slipped back into sleep and wondered, "What's the point?" Why would they go to his house? Would it happen again? And why? If the fight between Harry and Malfoy wasn't about his injury but about who they were to each other, then what did this moment mean?

Something different appeared in this dream, and yet, it was the same. An identical lodestar point.

Hermione, looking beautiful and striking and well-fed. She even looked well rested, though a bit worried, a little stressed. Harry was there looking tired yet calm. And with the two of them, Malfoy. He seemed different. Taller and sharper. He and Harry weren't looking at each other, whispered words and unanswered questions lingered between.

"Where have you been?"

"Did I do something to hurt you?"

"Why won't you just let this go?"

And then Hermione, her eyes glittering. "I want to talk to Xenophilius Lovegood about this." She showed them both the book Dumbledore left her. Harry and Malfoy both looked unsure, there was arguing and back-and-forth plans that seemed useless in the face of the safety they lived under. There was a resignation, the same hopeless feeling that existed in the other moment, but it was mixed with determination and a thirst for knowledge.

"He's not going to hurt us," Harry said. "Even Sirius said that he was a good man."

The full moon crests the sky as they left, but it was the same as before just with slightly different players and slightly different circumstances. It was the same moment, but what's the point?

He saw Xenophilius open the door in his robe, a discussion and a story, a warning delivered by bird. A fight, a capture, a boy with wings jumping in front of Harry. It was all jumbled, details that didn't pertain to Ron so therefore did not reveal themselves to him.

Ron pushed into his dream, taking control of what he was seeing, grasping onto the ends of the visions so that he could follow it. He saw the same thing happening again except always a little different. Sometimes it was only Hermione and Harry, sometimes it was Hermione, Harry, Ron, *and* Malfoy, sometimes Ron went alone. Sometimes only Hermione went. Sometimes Harry arrived by himself, a new scar etched into the skin of his face. Again and again, they always visited, they always talked, they were always attacked.

He felt hopeless to the visions, unable to examine what they meant or how to use them to do much of anything.

The burn of the winter sun crested onto his face, his eyelids no longer protecting him from the light. Morning beckoned, but Ron forced himself to stay in the vision, to see it through, to understand.

He saw the visions collapse together, all of them pinpointed into one singular moment. It was never about Xenophilius or answers, it was never about who came and who escaped. It was about where they ended up, the lodestar point, the guiding light, was the way everything changed once they were captured.

He drifted as the muscles of his body slowly awoke. He saw the man who ran the Hogshead peaking through a mirror, he saw a frantic elf delivering a message, he saw a planned rescue, and a desperate clawing for life. He saw Remus and Sirius hobbling up a hill, Remus collapsing into a large, old-fashioned bed, and Sirius, his eyes always sharp and knowing, settling his thin fingers on a Galleon, charmed by Hermione.

He saw the words just as understanding settled into him

“Malfoy Manor.”

the devil.

The heat of the Galleon burning against his cheek woke him out of a sleep so deep that, for a moment, not even his fingertips would move. He huffed quietly, reaching out of the warm cocoon of blankets around him to check the charmed item. He'd taken to sleeping with it under him, too afraid that he would oversleep and miss something important. He had to rub his eyes to see it clearly.

"Malfoy Manor."

He squinted in confusion, then brushed his finger over the letters as if to wipe the words away. They remained, clear as day, but his confusion persisted. He summoned his wand and cleared the words, replacing them with his own message.

"What?"

He didn't look away from the Galleon, not even blinking, as the answer came back a second later.

"Harry, Hermione, and Draco."

He cleared the words, but before he could write anything back, another word came through.

"Now."

"James," Regulus said sharply. James grunted, still deep in sleep next to him. Regulus placed a hand against his shoulder and shook him harshly, trying to wake him.

It had been a few hours since the full moon had set and it was only the second full moon that James had had to endure. Although perhaps suffer was a bit too harsh a word. Sure, the transformation was horrifying and James's screams still rang in Regulus's ears hours into the night, but James didn't seem nearly as ill-affected as Remus did.

For one, his wolf seemed almost... playful. Regulus hadn't spent much time around Remus as a werewolf beyond that one night years before, but he'd always seemed enraged and vicious. From what Regulus had read about werewolves, they were always like that, but that must have not been the complete truth. James's wolf took one look at Regulus in his bear form and decided they were the best of friends.

It was almost a little embarrassing. It certainly would have been if Regulus wasn't so relieved. He didn't think he would have been able to handle seeing James tear scars into his skin the way Remus did.

He brought this up to James a few days after the first full moon passed. He would have brought it up immediately, but James turned out to be far more *excitable and energetic* after the moon than Regulus would have expected. He spent most of his time after that night pinned to their bed or sleeping deeply wrapped in James's arms.

“I never thought that werewolves could have their own personalities,” Regulus told James, passing him a plate of eggs and toast, piled so high that it nearly toppled off.

James chewed thoughtfully before answering. “I suppose that makes sense. Animals have their own personalities.”

Regulus nodded distantly. “It’s a shame that Remus’s werewolf is so bitter.”

James gave a half shrug. “Moony spent a lot of years alone. He tore at himself trying to get free. He was a werewolf for nearly ten years before Sirius and I joined him on the full moons. Then abruptly both of us vanished, and he was left alone again for years. Maybe Moony wasn’t always like that, maybe he used to be playful.”

James had taken to omitting Peter completely when discussing moments from his life at Hogwarts. Regulus obviously hated Peter, but he found that listening to James pretend he never existed made him nervous. It was like James was blocking out an entire part of his life just so he could move forward. Regulus was well aware of that kind of behavior, and he knew better than most that it wouldn’t save James forever. When this was all over, if he managed to survive, they would have to talk about it.

“That’s sad,” he replied, haunted by the image of a child-sized werewolf crying out for companionship.

“Yeah,” James agreed solemnly. “Yeah, it really is, but at least he has Padfoot now.”

Regulus silently agreed, but for days afterward, he couldn’t get Remus out of his head. He was thankful that James didn’t feel that way, that he woke up feeling randy and only a little bit sore. If anything, Regulus was the sore one now. Still, he ached for Remus and the long years he’d spent suffering without anyone to help him. Regulus had been hard on him, unforgiving of the mistakes he’d made. He hadn’t thought about what Remus might have gone through.

“What are you thinking about?” James asked. Regulus hadn’t realized how still and silent he’d been, waiting for the guilt to recede. He didn’t want to explain it to James, it would make it feel too real.

“I’m thinking that it’s going to take weeks for these bruises to heal,” Regulus said, gesturing vaguely toward his covered waist. Both of them knew the deep finger and bite marks that littered his skin today. Not that Regulus was complaining. He was surprised to admit that he discovered something new about himself the first time he saw them.

James smirked, a spark lighting in his eyes. Regulus probably shouldn’t be encouraging him, but it had been so long since he’d seen James this mischievous and he’d missed it.

The second moon was better than the first. The transition was a tiny bit faster and when James transformed back the next morning, his bones snapping into place loudly, he’d only needed half an hour to calm down before he was tackling Regulus to the ground. Regulus was decidedly *not* the kind of man who liked being outside in the forest while doing *that*, so he’d pushed James off of him and demanded to be taken to bed first.

James had acceded and they spent the next hour in bed before both of them fell asleep. They'd probably only slept about four hours before the Galleon woke him up, and the strings of exhaustion still dug into his skin as they tried to drag him back to sleep.

"James, wake up!" Regulus shouted. James groaned, wrapping his arms tightly around Regulus's middle and pulling him in. "James, for the love of—please, wake up. It's an emergency. Harry's in trouble."

James's eyes popped open. "Harry?"

"Yes!" Regulus said far too loudly, panic making his breaths come quickly, all of them too shallow to fill his lungs. "We have to go now."

James was up and out of bed faster than Regulus had ever seen him move, but he was grateful for it. James's endless energy sparked him into action, forcing him out of bed. He summoned their clothes, both of them throwing everything on as quickly as they could.

"Should we take the tent?" James asked.

Regulus wanted to say no, they didn't have time, but he knew that it would be a bad idea to leave everything here in case something happened. They might need their stuff or a safe place to land.

"Yes," Regulus replied. "Help me take it down." James nodded rapidly, grabbing his wand and running outside, Regulus right at his heels. It didn't take long to dismantle the tent, but every second that ticked by was like another slice against Regulus's skin. Why had Harry left the manor? Where had they been going? How did they end up at Malfoy Manor? Did they go there specifically?

Surely not, he thought, but the trickling worry about Draco and his parents started to seep in. He knew Draco worried for their safety, and he might have decided to go back, especially if he didn't feel safe with Sirius and Remus. Regulus groaned, his worry like a physical pain, his stomach aching and twisting harshly. He should have prepared them all more, he should have been more careful.

He didn't even bother thinking about what could be happening to Harry and Hermione at Malfoy Manor, every avenue of thought was too dark for him to spend time on now. Draco could be the worst of all if he didn't go there willingly. His secret would be revealed, the Death Eaters, and potentially, Tom Riddle, would find out that he'd faked his death.

Regulus wished he'd spent more time rekindling his relationship with Narcissa in his second life. He should have befriended Draco earlier, spent time at his house, gotten to know his family. Then he might have been able to convince them to defect, to leave with Draco and keep him safe.

Now, it was too late.

The mistakes just seemed to pile up today, he couldn't escape them. There were so many moments when he hadn't been perfect and it felt like every single one wouldn't go

unpunished.

“Where is Malfoy Manor?”

“It’s in Wiltshire,” Regulus said. “I’ve only been once, but I think I remember where to apparate.”

“Okay,” James said, grabbing Regulus’s hand, intertwining their fingers in a show of trust so heavy that Regulus felt weighed down by it for a moment. He squeezed James’s hand, the only way he could tell him he loved him right now. He knew the words wouldn’t come if he tried to speak them, his throat already felt like it was closing up.

Regulus let his eyes drag around the small area where they’d set up their tent. They’d been in this particular clearing for the last two full moons, over a month of time, and it felt odd to be leaving it even though it was never meant to be permanent. It had been such a safe place for them as James had healed. And thank Merlin, for werewolf healing, he thought. Just over a month ago, James had his entire side torn open, and now he stood straight and tall like he’d never been injured.

Regulus leaned over and kissed James once on the lips, a chaste thing, just for good luck, then he pulled them away, apparating them to the hills of Wiltshire.

He knew he was in the right place the moment he landed. He remembered the long walk they had to take to Malfoy Manor. The manor had floo networks set up, but they didn’t open them very often, and Regulus’s mother loved the walk to the front gates. She remarked to Regulus that the broad, iron gates were a sign of wealth and status, that they would keep Narcissa safe long into her life.

How little all of that mattered now, he thought as he dragged James along with him. James kept up easily and after only a few steps, he pulled out the invisibility cloak and covered them both with it.

“Just in case,” he whispered. Regulus swallowed harshly, a lump in his throat. He loved him so much, more than he ever thought was possible, so much that sometimes he felt like he would burst from it.

“Good idea,” Regulus whispered back. He knew James was smiling from the way his hand tightened on Regulus’s.

The gates came into view right over a cresting hill, just as magnificent as the last time Regulus had seen them so many years ago. They would be embedded with magic so deep that it would be nearly impossible to break in. He hadn’t thought about it before, only focusing on getting here, but now that the realization dawned on him, dread started to drape over his shoulders.

A bark interrupted his spiral. He looked over so quickly that his neck popped and immediately spotted a shaggy black dog sitting primly between two shrubs right near the gate’s entrance.

“Sirius,” he breathed, a sigh of relief so great that it made him feel like he was deflating. He threw the cloak from him impulsively, not caring about the dangers of being seen, and threw himself at his brother. Sirius transformed just in time to catch him. He hadn’t realized how much he missed Sirius, it didn’t even cross his mind as a possibility, but there was safety there that ran so deep in his blood that he would never be able to shake it. For a moment, he felt like a little boy, running to his brother for safety when something went wrong. Sirius squeezed him tightly before opening his arms just enough to catch James as he did the exact same thing Regulus had done.

Sirius held them both with ease, his arms like a sanctuary. It was just enough peace for Regulus to remember why they were here.

“How did this happen?” Regulus asked, finally pulling away. James stepped with him, but he kept his hands on Regulus the entire time, one on his shoulder and one on his hip like he was trying to steady him. Regulus almost missed the way Sirius’s eyes caught on James’s grip.

“I don’t know,” Sirius answered once his eyes came back up to meet Regulus’s. “We left for the full moon last night, and when we came back, I knew something was wrong. I could feel a shift in the wards. I went to check on Harry and couldn’t find him. Hermione and Draco were also missing. I thought—well, there’s been something going on with Draco, but that doesn’t matter. I went back to my room and noticed the words on the Galleon. I thought it was from you at first, but the letters show up slightly differently depending on who is writing them. I didn’t even realize at first, but Hermione must have added that.”

“Why would they leave the manor?” James asked.

Sirius shook his head regretfully. “I wish I could tell you. I thought maybe Draco, but he seemed to be getting better.”

“What do you mean getting better?” Regulus asked a bit too sharply. “What’s wrong with him?”

“I’ll explain everything, but right now, we need to get inside and get everyone out.”

“How exactly are we going to do that?” Regulus asked frustratedly. “There is no way we can get through the wards.”

“Actually,” Sirius said, a smile breaking through the worry etched on his face, “I found something that might help us.” He grabbed something from his pocket and held it out to Regulus. Regulus took it carefully, the weight of the object surprising him so much that he almost dropped it. He held it up to his face to get a better look.

It looked a gold pocket watch, but instead of a clock, there was a sundial with runes etched along the sides. He inspected them quickly, picking out the rune for blood immediately.

“What is this?”

“I found it in Bella’s vault,” Sirius explained. “It’s a goblin-made object that opens wards. She must have inherited it, I can’t imagine she would have purchased such a thing, but it can

weave open wards and create a small pathway. It should be able to get us in.”

“I see the symbol for blood. Do we have to be blood-related?”

“I don’t think so. I think the blood refers to purity rather than relation.”

“Oh,” Regulus mumbled thoughtfully, something else finally occurring to him. “Where’s Remus?” He wondered if he was still recovering from the moon. He had access to Wolfsbane Potion presumably, but that didn’t mean his recovery wasn’t difficult. Sirius smiled bitterly, like he didn’t like to be reminded of the ways he and Remus were different, then turned slightly to point up to a line of trees on one of the hills overlooking the manor grounds.

“He’s up there,” Sirius said. “He’s going to keep out of sight, but whenever we find someone inside, we can bring them to him and he’ll apparate them home. He won’t be able to get in with the object, but he can still be helpful.”

“How are we going to get everyone out if it only works for purebloods?” James asked with a frown. “Harry’s a half blood and Hermione is muggleborn.”

“There might be others too,” Regulus said thoughtfully.

Sirius nodded. “I know, that presents some difficulty. We might have to fight our way out or potentially create a distraction so they can leave through the front door. The wards probably have anti-apparition qualities but they should be able to physically leave.”

Regulus nodded. “You’re probably right,” Regulus said. “And if not... well, I have a backup plan.”

Sirius’s eyebrows raised slightly, but Regulus shook his head. “We’ll cross that bridge if we get to it.”

“All right,” Sirius said. “Are we ready then?”

“Definitely,” Regulus agreed. The faster he could get his hands on Harry and the others, the better he would feel. He needed to make sure they were alive and unharmed.

“I’ll unlock it. You two stay under the cloak.”

“Will someone feel it when the wards shift?”

Sirius looked away before answering. “Probably,” he said unhappily.

Regulus let James pull him close against his chest as the cloak was thrown back over them. He was warm, his body heat spilling off of him like a waterfall meant to cleanse Regulus of every bad thought in his head. He breathed him in for just a moment, just long enough to settle his nerves.

“They’re going to be okay,” James said.

“You don’t know that,” Regulus replied automatically.

James held him just a little tighter. “Yes, I do, because we’re going to make sure of it.”

Regulus smiled softly and nodded, letting James’s endless optimism sink into his skin. He searched the windows of the manor as Sirius cast a disillusionment charm over himself and stepped up to the gate, the charmed object in his right hand. All the windows looked still and empty, the curtains pulled tightly closed over most of them, but he kept his eyes sharp looking for movement. There was no telling who was inside the manor right now.

Sirius mumbled quietly to himself as he spun the dial. It didn’t seem like anything was happening at first, but then James gasped, a shiver running through him so intensely that Regulus could feel it against him.

“It’s working,” he whispered.

“You can feel the wards?” Regulus asked. He felt James nod.

“It’s so intense,” he answered. Regulus wondered what it felt like, he wondered how James could sense it, but Sirius spoke and distracted him.

“Got it,” he said just as the gates swung open. Regulus and James hurried through, listening as the gates closed behind them.

“Do you remember the layout of the house?” Sirius asked.

Regulus shook his head before remembering that Sirius couldn’t see him. “Not really,” he said. “It’s been so long—”

“Do they have a cellar?” Sirius asked.

“I don’t know, I was here for a wedding, but I’m sure they do,” Regulus answered.

“We should check that first.”

“You think they’re being kept in the cellar?” James asked, his voice laced with horror.

“I think that’s the best-case scenario,” Sirius said grimly. James shivered again, this time for a completely different reason.

“If we get split up,” Regulus said, “head for Remus. If I don’t—if any of us don’t make it out, we get everyone else to safety before trying to help. Agreed?”

Sirius and James were quiet for a long, tense moment, but finally, they both agreed, a dark shadow crossing them all, a foreboding so intense that it was all Regulus could feel now. It was as if James had vanished from behind him as if Sirius had never been there to greet them.

He wondered if the front door to the manor would be locked. It had seemed so impossibly large the last time he was here, but now it just seemed like a door, something so thin and useless, yet it held so much darkness and danger behind it. Sirius reached out to open it, his hand shaking so badly that Regulus could see it through his disillusionment charm. Regulus knew why he was worried. It could be cursed to hurt anyone who tried to open it. That was

common at old pureblood houses. Even Black Manor had that curse, though James had been careful to remove it before it could do any damage.

It seemed they were in luck though. Sirius turned the handle easily and the door opened as if caught by the wind. It wasn't locked, Regulus thought vaguely. They probably didn't expect anyone to get through the wards without permission. There was no sense in locking the door when they had wards as thick as castle walls.

The entryway was extravagant, but it was clear that it hadn't been cleaned or repaired in a long while. Near the front door, a long blood stain spread across the rug and part of the hardwood floors. It looked dried, but still fresh enough to be a threat. There was dust on the floorboards and the chandelier. The Malfoy elves weren't taking care of it. Surely they had more than just Dobby, Regulus knew they'd lost him years before.

"Which way to the cellar?"

"I'm not sure," Regulus replied. "Let's go this way." He gestured toward the right, heading down the hallway before either of them could reply. He knew the ballroom was in the back of the house near the gardens, and he knew the parlor was toward the left. He'd been dragged into that room by his father and some of the other men at the event. They passed an open door on their left, and Regulus peaked in carefully.

It was just as silent as the rest of the house. Based on the shelves on the walls, he guessed it was a trophy room. However, it had been ransacked, most of the items missing from their exalted places. Even some of the floorboards were pulled up like someone had been expecting to find treasured hiding under the floor. Regulus highly doubted they'd found anything. The Malfoys wouldn't be the type to hide valuables; they would only display them.

Moving away from the parlor they passed a series of closed doors, turning the corner to eventually find a set of stairs, one side leading up and the other leading down.

"This must be it," Regulus posited.

"I'll stay here and keep watch," Sirius said. "You have your Galleon?"

"Yes," Regulus said. "Do you want the cloak?"

"No, I'll be fine. I'll stay up against the wall. Just go quickly."

"Okay, come on, James," Regulus said quickly.

James's body felt like pillars built on shifting ground. All of his muscles were locked with stress, but the world moved beneath his feet like the unsteady ties of fate. He followed Regulus, the brave set of his shoulders the only thing that kept James's body tied to the earth. He worried that he wouldn't find his son down in the depths of the cellar, that he would be tucked away in one of the rooms, that something horrible beyond imagination was happening to him.

He'd barely had the chance to get to know him. They hadn't had the time yet. They deserved the chance to learn about each other without the madness of war breathing down their necks. Foolishly, he felt a surge of jealousy for Regulus. He had so many years with Harry that James had missed.

He hated to think it, but sometimes he felt that Draco liked him more than his own son. He'd thought Draco would sneer at him, would look down on him, but he'd accept James into his life like he'd known James was always supposed to be there. In the short time they'd known each other, James had gotten the distinct impression that Draco trusted him. He loved that, cherished it dearly, but he wished Harry was the same way.

Of course, he understood why Harry was so difficult to get through to. Based on the way Regulus, Sirius, and Remus had described Harry's childhood, they were all lucky he was as nice and accepting as he was.

That didn't make his distance from James feel any easier. If anything, knowing why he was like that made it so much worse. His son had been so open as a toddler, so sweet and sociable. That piece of him had been locked away by the Dursleys.

Even as they climbed down the stairs, one careful step at a time, he found himself mourning for the relationship that they might not get to have.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, they found a door made of iron bars, far enough apart that James and Regulus could see clearly into the cellar.

"Should I call out for them?" Regulus whispered, so low that James could barely hear it. James's grip on his wand tightened, he turned away from the door to watch the stairs in case someone charged down them.

"Yes, do it," James said. Regulus took a deep breath, James could feel the way his bones moved against his back. It was comforting to sense him there, to remember that despite everything, he still had Regulus by his side.

"Harry," Regulus called. His voice seemed startlingly loud, though he spoke at a normal volume. It was just the way his voice broke through the encrusted silence that made it seem booming. There was nothing for a moment, not even the creaking of an old house, but then James heard footsteps. They echoed through the cellar, though it was clear the person was walking carefully.

"Who's there?" Harry asked, his voice firm despite how afraid he must have been feeling. Something in James cracked open, the grief he was feeling a moment before morphing with the power of relief.

Regulus removed the cloak from both of them and stepped up to the bars. "Harry!" he called again, his voice a mirror to James's own feelings.

"Regulus," Harry cried out. James could hear him running forward, though he didn't look back at him, no matter how much he wanted to. He had to keep an eye on the stairs, he had to watch Regulus's back. "You found us!"

“We got the message on the Galleon.”

“It worked,” Hermione breathed, her voice shaking.

“What were you guys thinking why did you leave the manor?” Regulus asked, shifting into a parent as if no time had passed. James winced for Harry and Hermione. He’d been on the receiving end of that tone more than a few times and he did not envy them.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said instantly.

“It was my idea,” Hermione said at the same time. “We were looking for answers. It was stupid to go anywhere, but we—” She seemed unable to finish her sentence.

“We were just trying to help,” Harry said. “Dumbledore left something for Hermione—”

“Dumbledore seemed very interested in getting you all killed,” Regulus said harshly. “We need to get out of—Luna?” The surprise in Regulus’s voice was enough to make James turn around, monetarily abandoning his task. Harry and Hermione looked disheveled and tired, but safe and mostly unharmed. Behind them was Luna Lovegood, Pandora’s daughter. She looked far too thin and covered in dirt like she’d been down in the cellar for weeks.

“Hello, James,” Luna said kindly. “It’s nice to see you again.”

James tilted his head, trying to remember when they would have met. He only knew about her from his time as a ghost. But then he recalled, that one night so many years ago, when James was nothing more than an apparition from Regulus’s soul. She’d seen him, spoken to him like he was really there.

“Luna,” he greeted. “Why are you here?” He hoped his words didn’t sound accusatory. He did not like seeing a child look so malnourished.

“It’s my fault,” Harry said soberly, a deep frown on his lips.

“Oh, no, Harry,” Luna said soothingly. “You did not abduct me.”

“You were abducted?” Regulus asked, his voice catching slightly.

Luna nodded. “On the train ride back for the holidays,” she said. Her voice remained even, not even an ounce of distress or sadness. “My father was writing in support of Harry despite what the Ministry was saying. They wanted him to stop.”

“I’m so sorry, Luna,” Harry said.

Luna smiled at him, reaching out to rub his shoulder like he was a puppy sulking after falling into a puddle.

“How long have you been down here?”

“Quite a while, I think,” she said with a quizzical frown.

“At least three weeks,” someone else said, the voice coming from deeper in the cellar. James surprisingly could see most of the area, his vision vastly improved by the lycanthropy that now ran through his veins. “That’s when I was brought here.”

“Who is that?” Regulus called out.

A young man stepped out from behind a stone wall. James recognized him but he couldn’t place his name.

“Dean?” Regulus asked sharply. “How?”

“It’s because he’s muggleborn,” Hermione said. “They brought him here instead of Azkaban because of his connection to Harry. I think they thought Harry would come to rescue him.”

“I would have had I known,” Harry said to Dean. Dean laughed, his teeth so white that they almost glowed in the darkness.

“Thanks, mate,” Dean said cheerfully.

“We need to get this door open,” Regulus said.

“Can you unlock it?” Hermione asked. “We’ve tried everything, but they took our wands and I can only do so much wandless magic.”

Regulus started trying a collection of spells. “You can do wandless magic?” James asked Hermione. Mostly to distract them all from the way they were watching Regulus work with trepidation.

“Only a bit,” Hermione said. She seemed a tiny bit embarrassed to admit it, but underneath the embarrassment, was a little spark of smugness. James laughed softly.

“None of these spells are working,” Regulus said hopelessly.

“Maybe we need someone in the family to open it,” James said, glancing around the group of teenagers in front of him. He almost didn’t want to ask. “Where is Draco?”

Harry’s face fell immediately, agony worse than James had ever seen on his young features. He turned his back like he couldn’t bear to look at them. Hermione gave him a worried look before answering. “They took him upstairs,” she said quietly.

“No,” James breathed. Harry made a noise like a choked-out sob, lifting his arm to cover his mouth. James wasn’t completely idiotic, he knew that something was going on between Draco and Harry long before he left with Regulus. He knew about their incident in the bathroom and he’d heard Regulus talk about their obsession with each other for years, but he hadn’t expected it to escalate enough for Harry to react like this.

He wondered about what Sirius said, about something happening to Draco while they were away.

“We’ll find him,” Regulus said assuredly. He turned his head slightly and said under his breath, “I have an idea for the door, but it’s a bit destructive.”

“What is it?” James asked worriedly. Regulus cringed, and reached into the small charmed bag, summoning something with a flick of his wand. When James saw what it was, he gasped. “Do you think it’ll work?”

Regulus shrugged, the basilisk fang in his hand, held like a knife. “It’s possible.”

James looked back up. Everyone but Harry was watching them, even a goblin who was now poking his head out from behind a half-crumbled wall. James wondered how many people they would need to rescue.

“Do it,” he said as his eyes landed back on his son. Harry was still turned away, his shoulders vibrating slightly. Regulus nodded once. He struck the door without pause, a brazen choice in James’s opinion. The venom worked quickly, disintegrating the lock and eating up iron like it was candy floss. For a split second, he worried it would keep eating away at the manor, but it stopped once it had devoured the hinges, vanishing the door like it had never existed.

“Let’s go,” Regulus said.

“Mr. Ollivander is here too,” Dean said. “I’m not sure he can walk.”

“Ollivander? Like—”

Dean nodded. James and Regulus hurried into the cellar, James following Dean as he led him into the cellar’s depths where he found the goblin—he clearly worked at Gringotts, he was still wearing the uniform—and the wandmaker, Ollivander, curled up against the corner. He looked near death, frail and haunted.

“Mr. Ollivander?” James asked. The man’s eyes slid open.

“Ah, Mr. James Potter. Mahogany, eleven inches, with a unicorn tail hair, I believe.”

James gaped at him for a moment. “How—”

“Though you no longer use that wand, do you?”

James slowly shook his head.

Ollivander nodded. “Are we leaving then?”

“Yep,” James said, snapping his mouth closed.

“I can carry him,” Dean said.

“Are you sure?” James asked. Dean didn’t look so good himself, but he nodded quickly. Ollivander allowed himself to be lifted, though he refused to be fully carried, keeping his feet on the ground and his arm around Dean’s shoulders.

“Lead the way,” Dean said.

James turned and noticed the goblin watching them warily. “I’m James,” he said impulsively.

The goblin narrowed his eyes. “I know who you are,” he grumbled.

“Right,” James replied awkwardly.

“That’s Griphook,” Dean said. “He’s coming with us.”

“Of course,” James said automatically, surprised by the firmness of Dean’s voice. Did Dean think they would rescue everyone and leave Griphook behind? Well, seeing as how he’d been treated by the wizarding world so far, James couldn’t exactly be surprised. “Can you walk?”

Griphook glared for a moment longer before answering. “I can.”

“Then let’s get out of here,” James said. He led them back to the entrance to the cellar. Luna and Hermione were standing close together, their arms pressed up against each other. Regulus had his arm wrapped around Harry, his head bowed as he whispered to him. Harry was nodding along with whatever he was saying. Regulus’s eyes lifted when James walked up.

“Ready?” he asked. James nodded. He wanted to reach out to Harry, but he could see how upset he was, and he unexpectedly felt out of his depth.

James led them out of the cellar with Regulus at the very back of the group, Harry right next to him. Sirius removed his disillusionment charm the moment he spotted them.

“You found them,” Sirius breathed. “Hermione, I’m so glad you’re okay.” His eyes searched the others coming up the stairs. “How many of you were down there?”

“More than there should have been,” James said darkly. Sirius nodded once, his voice drawn with stress. “Draco isn’t with them.”

“Oh no,” Sirius breathed.

“Let’s get everyone out to Remus,” Regulus said, finally making it to the top of the stairs.

“Then you and I can come back for Draco.” He aimed the words at Sirius, and though Sirius nodded immediately, it was clear Harry wasn’t going to let that happen.

“No, I’m not leaving without him,” Harry said.

Regulus looked momentarily shocked. “We’re just taking you outside.”

“No,” Harry replied sharply, pulling away from Regulus like he was going to make a run for it. Based on the apprehension on Regulus’s face, James figured he was having the same thought. Regulus looked back at James and Sirius like he was searching for answers.

“I’ll take everyone else outside,” James volunteered. “You two take Harry and find Draco.”

Sirius handed him the charmed object he'd used to get them into the manor's wards, but Regulus sucked in a breath. James was sure he was feeling the same sharp pain that James was feeling. The threat of separation like a misplaced nail, sticking up on the ground, waiting to injure anyone that wasn't watching their step. Their eyes met, but James found no argument. He found a silent agreement—Regulus thought it was a good plan—but he could also see the shared worry that they might not see each other again. If something went wrong, they might not have the time James hoped for.

“Yes,” Regulus said. “Go now, before anyone finds you.” He pulled his charm bag out and threw it at James. “Just in case.”

James wanted to argue, to insist that Regulus keep the bag for himself, but they were out of time. “This way,” he said, and with one final breath, turned away from Regulus, Sirius, and James. They moved through the manor quickly, James's worry growing with every step, but they weren't stopped. It was like the home had been abandoned, though James knew that couldn't be true. There was dark magic layered into all the fixtures, the walls, and the floor. They'd been using this place for something dark, James had just caught them on an off day.

The front door opened easily, but once they were outside, James started to run. They could be spotted from any of the windows, and they still had to get through the gate. He could only hope that they would be allowed through. He thought that Luna was a pureblood, but the rest of them? They might all end up trapped.

“The gates are opening!” Hermione said breathlessly. James could hear her running behind him. He could barely believe his eyes, but she was right. The gates were opening as they approached. They were likely charmed to do that, created to sense when guests were leaving. He closed his eyes just as he ran up to them, feeling the thick wards sizzle against his skin as he slid through them.

He turned the moment he was free, pointing his wand toward the rest of the group as one by one they exited the manor's wards. He breathed a sigh of relief as each one was freed. Ollivander was practically being dragged by Dean by that point, but he managed to get them through just as the gates slammed closed behind them.

James looked around the group, double-checking that everyone was with them. It felt wrong to have left Regulus behind, but he tried to ignore the cold, empty space beside him. Luna, he noticed, was limping badly, though she hadn't complained once about the running.

“Luna—” he was interrupted by the sound of apparition. He looked around rapidly, watching for someone who'd come to hurt them.

“It was Griphook,” Dean said, panting heavily. “He left us.”

“Oh,” James breathed. “Someone might have heard that. We need to move.”

“Where is Remus?” Hermione asked.

“I'll show you. Luna, will you climb on my back?” James asked.

Luna tilted her head, her blonde hair looked grey from all the dirt layered into it. “If you'd like,” she said reasonably. He bent down in front of her, waiting for her to grab onto him. He wasn't going to make a young girl limp up a hill after them.

“This way,” he called to them and started up the hill Sirius had gestured to. The entire time they ran, James was sure they were being watched. He could feel eyes on him, but he tried to ignore them. If no one was attacking, then they weren't his problem. It didn't matter who saw them escape, soon they'd be far enough away that it wouldn't matter.

The moment they were within a few yards of the trees, James called out, “Remus!”

Remus appeared between the trees immediately, so fast that he looked like he'd apparated there. He didn't have time to take them all in, because Hermione was already rushing forward, outrunning James completely. Remus grabbed her by the shoulders. She was speaking a mile a minute, so fast that James couldn't understand her, but Remus was nodding along.

“Sirius is still inside?” he asked. Hermione nodded.

James slowly lowered Luna to the ground just as Dean and Ollivander made it into the relative safety of the trees.

“I want to wait for them,” James said. Remus looked up at him, and immediately something changed in his expression, something shifted into place. A hundred different emotions crossed his face, one right after the other, all of them a mystery to James. Finally, he landed on sorrow and understanding.

“Oh, James.”

the high priestess.

Harry was sure he'd never made a mistake this large, not even when he'd gone to the Ministry and Regulus had ended up dead.

It hadn't felt like a mistake at the time, it hadn't even felt that reckless. They were going to talk to one of their allies. Or so they *thought*. It turned out that Xenophilius was just as trapped as the rest of them, and without them noticing, he was sending off a letter to the very people who wanted Harry captured.

When they'd been ambushed at the house, Hermione had tried to gather them so they could apparate away, but at the last second, it hadn't worked. There were wizards—Death Eaters presumably, but Harry couldn't make them out—throwing spells at them left and right. One grazed Harry's legs as he was lurching toward Hermione causing him to cry out in pain. Draco had also been running at her, but when Harry cried out, he spun around to face the Death Eater and charged at him.

Harry didn't know what to do. He panicked. He turned away from Hermione and tried to pull Draco back, to get him to safety, but Draco wasn't even trying to fight the Death Eater. At least, he wasn't trying to hit him with any spells. He didn't even have his wand out. He was standing tall, his hands curled like he was going to scratch the man's eyes out, and his back was jolting like enduring the aftereffects of an electric shock.

"Draco, come on," Harry called desperately, and in his distraction, was hit in the face with a stunning spell. He was out before he hit the ground.

When he woke up, he was in the cellar and Draco was missing.

Harry couldn't get a grip on himself after that, he curled up against the cellar wall and quietly panicked until someone came over and wrapped their arms around him. He'd thought it was Hermione at first, he figured she was the only one down there with him, but when he finally felt solid enough to look up, he found Luna staring down at him.

"Luna?" he asked.

"Hi, Harry," she greeted. "I've really missed you." It was the most emotional he'd ever heard her. It made his breath catch again. He reached out for her, hugging her as tightly as he could. He hadn't even realized what was happening to her, he didn't know what was happening to anyone that wasn't at Black Manor.

He'd worried about that early on, but Sirius and Remus had both told him to focus on keeping himself safe. It seemed so selfish now. So many people were affected by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. And what was Harry doing? Sneaking around with the child of one?

He felt so worthless, worse than he'd ever felt, and Regulus and James arriving to rescue him didn't help.

When James went back to gather Ollivander, Regulus came to speak to him. Distantly, Harry realized that he was trying to comfort him, to ground him, but Harry wasn't listening. All he was thinking about was all the people suffering and how little he was doing to help them.

Then they tried to get him to leave the manor without Draco, and Harry very nearly lost his mind. He'd failed so many. He would *not* fail Draco, and not just because he was... doing what he was doing with him, but because Draco was almost like a friend—if a friend could be someone he wanted to kiss every chance that he got—and Harry wasn't going to let him down.

He demanded to stay, prepared to fight them if they tried to make him leave, knowing he was inconveniencing them, knowing he was likely making things harder. He didn't care now. He wouldn't stay locked away any longer, not with everything that was going on.

And he would not leave Malfoy Manor without Draco next to him.

Malfoy Manor was just as broad and empty as Black Manor, though Black Manor seemed lighter somehow. He would guess it was James's touch, the way his magic had reshaped the house, but he had no way of knowing for sure. Malfoy Manor felt like it had been covered in shadows for decades, every breath he took felt heavy and rotten. He couldn't imagine living there, but he'd heard Draco describe it from when he was a kid. There was no way that this was the same Malfoy Manor.

He tried to picture Draco as a little boy playing in the library or the halls, but he couldn't do it. He tried to remember what Draco was like when they'd first met. Uptight and stiff, every other word layered with bigotry he didn't even understand. Harry could imagine this home building a boy like that, yet Draco seemed so happy with it.

They climbed a set of stairs and passed a family portrait of Draco's parents. They seemed so rigid, so stern, yet Draco described so many moments when they'd been playful and happy, almost like normal parents.

Harry found it impossible to rectify the two sides of Draco's life. It made it even more difficult trying to connect them to who Draco was now. Bright and soft and yet dark and demanding. There were so many contradictions, and still, Harry only knew a fraction of them.

Draco had been keeping secrets. That was the other thing that lingered in his mind. He'd been keeping them for a long time, probably longer than Harry realized, but after that night, when Draco had shoved away from him and locked himself in his room, Harry knew the secret was far bigger than he imagined.

He'd spent the days after that night pacing his bedroom, waiting for news about how Draco was doing. Sirius and Remus seemed remiss to tell him anything, and he kept catching them sharing this loaded, knowing look that set Harry's teeth on edge. He just wanted to *know* what was happening. After two days, he'd decided that he must have done something to hurt Draco, he must have done something wrong. Something must have been *wrong* with him.

By the time Draco returned over a week later, seeming mostly normal, Harry had been eaten up inside by his guilt. He felt like an empty puppet being carried through the halls by a set of strings. He'd begun to hate himself and he didn't even know why he should yet.

It was all exhausting, and then suddenly, Draco was back. He was the same—head held high as always—but Harry couldn't shake the feeling that something was so wrong.

Harry tried to talk to Draco about it, but even though he'd returned, he kept Harry at arm's length. There were no more nighttime talks or shared glances, Draco kept his eyes down and his door locked. Harry knew that second thing because he'd tried to go check on him more than once, but when he knocked on the door, Draco never came to answer it, and when he grew desperate and tried to open it, he found that the knob wouldn't even turn beneath his hand as if it had been charmed closed.

With Draco no longer an option for him to talk to, Harry decided to seek out Sirius for advice.

Sirius, unfortunately, now knew far more about what Harry and Draco had been doing than Harry ever wanted him to. After that morning, when Draco had locked himself in his bedroom and Remus and Sirius were trying to get the door open, Sirius had shouted out to Harry that they would talk about it later. Hermione had been quick to jump on that.

"What is he talking about? Did you do something to Malfoy?" she asked.

Harry shook his head, clamping his teeth together like his secrets would spill out of him like word vomit if he didn't keep them locked up tight.

"I don't want to talk about it," he told her once he felt like he could safely speak again.

Hermione frowned. "I mean, you don't have to," she said kindly, "but you know I'm here to listen. It's not like I'm going to judge you if you got into a fight with him or something. I don't think any of us expect any different."

Harry swallowed harshly, his mouth feeling suddenly dry. "I don't think—we weren't fighting."

"You weren't?" Hermione asked, her eyebrows jumping up in time with her question.

Harry didn't think they were fighting. He wasn't sure that they'd even argued in weeks, nothing beyond petty, toothless bickering, but what if he had been reading the situation wrong? He didn't know how to tell.

"Can we talk about something other than Malfoy?"

"Yeah," Hermione said simply and changed the subject to something they'd learned in class one of their classes. It wasn't the most interesting topic, but it gave Harry an excuse to silently nod along rather than feeling like he was being interrogated.

When Sirius eventually joined them, he'd kindly but firmly sent Hermione away, saying that he needed to talk to Harry. Harry started sweating immediately, his hands growing clammy

and uncomfortable.

“What do you want to talk about?” Harry asked.

“Harry,” Sirius said, sounding much older all of a sudden like a weathered parent tired of having the same conversation with his kid. It made Harry even more nervous. “You know you can trust me, right?”

That wasn’t what Harry expected him to say, but he nodded anyway.

“Then why don’t you start by telling me what’s been happening between you and Draco?”

So Harry did. He told him. It took some weaseling and a lot of guesses on Sirius’s part before Harry confessed to all of it, but he told him. He wasn’t sure what he expected from Sirius, but in the end, it was okay. He left feeling a little less tightly wound and a little more settled, but as Draco’s absence dragged on, that wrong feeling returned.

“He’s avoiding me,” he told Sirius a week or so after Draco returned when the silent treatment was starting to get under his skin in a way that only Draco Malfoy could accomplish.

“Draco?” Sirius asked.

Harry squeezed his eyes together. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because that’s what’s happening,” Harry grumbled. “I don’t think—” He blew out a long breath, the words too embarrassing to speak out loud.

“You don’t think what?” Sirius asked anyway. They’d been heading to the ballroom to practice dueling, it was Harry’s favorite place to visit when the weather was bad and Sirius was more than happy to use it with him, but when Harry had started to speak, Sirius had slowed to a stop, ensuring they were face to face.

“I don’t think he likes me anymore,” Harry said. He *knew* it was an embarrassing thing to say, and yet it was so much worse than he could have expected. He felt so foolish. How could he let *Draco Malfoy* of all people make him feel this way? He was such an idiot.

Sirius smiled softly, a kind twinkle in his eye.

“You think I’m an idiot,” Harry mumbled.

“I would never think that,” Sirius said. “Don’t ever say that about yourself.”

Harry gave a half-hearted shrug, unmoved by Sirius’s denial. He just wanted to head to the ballroom already. At least if Sirius was wiping the floor with him, Harry wouldn’t have to think about Draco and his stupid bright eyes. Sirius didn’t seem keen on continuing with their plans though, at least not yet.

“Did you know that it took years for Moony and I to get together?” Sirius asked suddenly.

“Hm?” Harry wondered. “It did?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sirius said, throwing his head back. “Both times too! James used to say that the way we acted about each other at Hogwarts would have put a lesser man into an insane asylum.”

Harry laughed softly.

“I never knew what he meant until it happened the second time. After—” he cleared his throat, but his face didn’t fall, his joy was still so evident. “After Azkaban, I thought Moony and I would never get that back. I’d like to say I accepted it, but I’m pretty sure I was just hurting my own feelings over and over again. I couldn’t let him go and I couldn’t get him any closer. It was torture.”

Harry wondered how he could maintain such a sunny demeanor discussing something that sounded so heartbreaking. Could he have healed that much?

“It wasn’t easy for us, but we figured it out eventually. Things work on their own timeline, and you can’t make someone be ready if they aren’t.”

“So you’re saying things between Draco and I are going to work out on their own?” Harry asked with a curious eyebrow raised. He wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. He didn’t know what he wanted from Draco beyond the feel of his lips and body against his own, or the sharp sting of his eyes landing on Harry’s skin.

Sirius tilted his head back and forth like he was mentally weighing the odds of Harry and Draco’s future, then said, “Maybe. Maybe it’ll work out with someone completely different. What I’m saying is that you shouldn’t punish yourself when you don’t know how Draco’s feeling or where pieces might land. Give it some time either way, and I think you’ll find that things will shake out as they’re supposed to.”

Harry chewed on those words for a long couple of minutes then nodded. “Okay,” he agreed.

“All right?” Sirius asked. Harry nodded again, a little more enthusiastically. “Then come on. I’ve got a duel to win!”

“Winning a duel against a teenager isn’t something to brag about,” Harry called, repeating the words he’d heard Remus say to Sirius more than a few times.

“It is if that teenager is the great Harry Potter!” Sirius shouted with a laugh. Harry laughed too, everything a little lighter on his shoulders. He still felt that relief long after he’d—as predicted—lost his duel against Sirius, but as he remembered the nights Draco had been locked away and Harry had worried that he’d hurt him, the guilt started to come back again and Sirius’s advice became a little too fuzzy to remember.

He couldn’t hold it in anymore and the next day, Harry did what he’d been really trying not to do.

“Why are you avoiding me?” Harry demanded harshly, pinning Draco to the wall the moment he saw him heading to class downstairs. Draco huffed before peeling Harry off of him. It was almost humiliatingly easy for him as if Harry was nothing but a harmless kitten. Harry was not a weak person. He flew on his broom every day, staying sharp physically. He knew he was strong.

“I’m not avoiding you,” Draco said.

“Yes, you are,” Harry responded instantly, his voice growing a little shaky as Draco held him at arm's length. He’d forgotten what it felt like, the firmness and strength in Draco’s hands making him feel less unstable on the earth.

Draco scoffed. “Why are you saying this? Because I’m not sneaking out every night to snog you every other night?” He said the words with so much disdain that Harry recoiled back like he’d been slapped. He wasn’t expecting to feel as stung as he felt. He barely had time to react though because instantly Draco’s face fell and Harry saw his own hurt feelings reflected back at him. “I didn’t mean that.”

“Then why did you say it?” Harry asked unhappily, shaking Draco’s hands off of him. Draco let his arms fall, but he frowned as he did it like he didn’t want to stop touching Harry. Harry, painfully, hoped that was true.

“I don’t want to talk about it, okay?” Draco said with a tired sigh. “Something—can you just drop it, please?”

“So what?” Harry asked, still feeling like a petulant child who’d been told no for the first time in his life. “That’s it? You won’t even speak to me anymore?”

“I wasn’t aware that you liked speaking to me,” Draco said, his honesty so blatant that it shooed away Harry’s irritation.

“Well, I mean... I wouldn’t usually, but I thought...”

“You thought?” Draco looked up at him, something that almost looked like hope dancing there on his face.

“I figured we could at least talk to each other now,” Harry finished lamely, but Draco smiled softly.

“Yeah, I guess we can talk to each other,” he said.

“Okay,” Harry agreed, his shoulders dropping. It wasn’t what he wanted, but it also wasn’t a terrible outcome. If Draco still wanted to talk to him, if he didn’t hate him, then surely Harry hadn’t hurt him or anything. Surely, there wasn’t wrong with Harry.

The heavy drapes of a secret hung between them though, even as an agreement was reached. He could see that Draco had been hiding something, and he could see the way it was bothering him, but Harry couldn’t ask about it. Draco didn’t want to talk about it and no matter how much Harry wanted to know the truth, he couldn’t force Draco to tell him it.

What sparked from there was an uneasy acquaintanceship. There was no more snogging or sneaking around or nighttime walks, but Draco talked to him in classes, and occasionally, he joined Hermione and Harry when they hung out after dinner. Hermione had invited him, she said, because she felt bad that he was always alone and she figured if Harry was friendly-ish with him now, then he shouldn't be excluded.

That's how Draco was included in the plan to visit Xenophilius Lovegood, and how he'd ended up captured when he was supposed to be *dead*.

Harry, as they climbed the stairs of Malfoy Manor, worried about what that faked death meant for Draco now. Would Voldemort kill him now that he knew the truth? The thought almost made Harry dizzy. He doubled his speed, ignoring Regulus as he told him to take it slow, and moved through the manor with more purpose trying to locate Draco. If he was safe, then all Harry had to do was get him out. He could do that.

Harry checked a few doors that ended up being locked before he felt a strong hand on his shoulder. He jumped slightly, adrenaline and fear making him feel unsteady.

"Let me try something," Sirius said. Harry was sure Sirius was mad at him. He'd left the manor the one night he knew Sirius and Remus wouldn't be around, he'd disobeyed them. He knew he'd likely be punished when they got back, but he hoped that it wouldn't be as bad as anything the Dursleys did to him.

"Okay," Harry agreed, his body tensing as Sirius drew his wand.

"*Homenum Revelio*," Sirius cast with a whisper. Instantly, half a dozen shapes appeared through the walls like projection lights were shining from the ceiling. In a room only a few paces down from them, there were three people standing in a small circle. He would guess they were all men based on their height and shape, but he couldn't be sure who they were beyond that. He didn't remember the Death Eaters that had brought them there.

He looked away from them and narrowed in on a room halfway down the monstrously long corridor. It was another group of three people, except this time, Harry was very sure that one of them was Draco. He could just tell.

Harry took off without thinking or waiting for Regulus or Sirius. It looked like Draco was in there with a man and a woman, it was probably his parents, but Harry couldn't be sure until he saw them himself.

He burst through the door into a large, empty sitting room, spotting Draco and his shiny blonde hair with barely a glance.

"You will be welcomed back," someone was saying, cutting off right as Harry rushed forward and jumped in front of Draco, his wand drawn. "Potter," Lucius growled.

"Don't hurt him," Harry shouted, his magic sparking at his fingertips like it was about to catch his wand on fire.

"How did you esc—"

“We would never hurt Draco,” Narcissa said. She looked run ragged, they both did, Harry realized. They looked like they hadn’t slept in months and like they’d been purposefully starved. Neither of them were holding a wand.

“You think sending me back to the Dark Lord after I betrayed him wouldn’t hurt me?” Draco asked, his voice tight with unexpressed emotion.

“Draco, please, it is the only way,” Lucius pleaded. “He will reward us, you’ll see.”

“I won’t do it,” Draco said, though he didn’t sound sure. “Please, father, you can’t make me.”

“All he wants is Potter,” Lucius said as if Harry wasn’t even in the room. Harry was too stunned to do much of anything beyond listening.

“No!” Draco snarled with so much anger that every hair on Harry’s body stood on end. It was like he was seconds away from being electrocuted, struck down by a rouge thunderstorm.

“Draco,” Narcissa breathed. She covered her mouth, her eyes opened wide.

“Mother,” Draco replied, he sounded pained. “I apologize.”

“You apologize?” Harry asked incredulously. He hadn’t meant to speak.

“You can’t call the Dark Lord,” Draco said, ignoring Harry completely. “I won’t let you.”

Lucius reeled back, his eyes darker than Harry had ever seen them. “It is not up to you,” Lucius said. “You’re a child, Draco. Calling him is the only way to keep you safe.” Harry lowered his wand slightly, even with the insanity that Lucius was suggesting, Harry could feel that he believed his words. He really did think he was protecting Draco by letting Harry die.

Lucius yanked on his sleeve, dragging it up his arm and revealing the Dark Mark burned into his skin. Harry didn’t know what to do or how to react, but it didn’t matter, because all at once, everyone else seemed to decide for him.

Lucius touched his mark with one finger as Narcissa lunged for Draco. Harry wasn’t sure what she was planning to do. Draco moved forward at the same moment, but he wasn’t moving toward his mum, but his dad. His hand drew Harry’s attention, his nails...they were so long like he had knives growing out of the tips of his fingers. He sprung forward with one hand out like he was preparing to fight while the other one grabbed Harry and shoved him back.

Harry stumbled back two steps and then saw a spell erupt between Draco’s parents and Draco. A *protego* wall so thick that both Draco and Narcissa were thrown back from it, Narcissa nearly falling to the ground while Draco hopped back with a grace Harry thought was unnerving.

Narcissa and Lucius looked up, both of their mouths hanging open, before Narcissa spoke. “Sirius,” she breathed.

“You won’t touch him,” Sirius said, his voice laced with venom. “*Either* of them.”

“Let me through,” Draco insisted, his voice sounding like three people speaking on top of each other. The noise did something very odd to Harry’s body, his vision went fuzzy and his knees grew weak, but his magic reacted like it was preparing for a fight. He felt like he could take down Voldemort himself at that moment.

“He’s already called him,” Regulus said. Harry wasn’t sure who the words were aimed at, perhaps Sirius.

“We need to leave,” Sirius said.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Lucius growled at the same moment that Narcissa spoke again.

“It’s not possible,” she said, her words choked and strained.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus said, which confused Harry. “Truly.”

“Regulus,” Narcissa said.

“There is someone coming down the hall,” Sirius shouted urgently.

“Kreacher. Now!” Regulus said. It was the last thing he heard from everyone, but he managed to see Narcissa and Lucius moving forward one final time. He wasn’t sure if they were reaching for Harry or Draco.

The feeling of apparition tugged at him viciously, but it was over before it started and when he blinked open his eyes, he found himself on a hill overlooking what he assumed was Malfoy Manor. The building was sprawling and dark with tall hedges surrounding it so intricately that it looked like a fortress.

“Kreacher?” James said. Harry turned to look at him, finding Remus, Luna, Hermione, Ollivander, and Dean all staring at him. They were outside, they’d made it out. “Where is Regulus?”

Kreacher, who was standing between Harry and violently shaking Draco, glared at James before apparating away. “Is he going back for him?” Remus whispered.

Harry didn’t know, he couldn’t answer, he felt like he was going to be sick, but he was more worried about what was happening to Draco, especially as he started shaking so badly that he fell to his knees.

“Draco!” Harry said unwillingly, reaching out to touch his back. Draco made an odd sound like a moan and mewl of pain mixed together. “What’s wrong?”

“Since when does he call him Draco,” James mumbled.

“Please,” Draco hissed. “Please, don’t touch me.”

“Harry,” Remus said uneasily.

“I can’t control it,” Draco whispered. “I can’t stop it. Please. Get him away from me. I won’t be able to stop myself.”

Harry gasped, not at the words Draco was hissing out like a man possessed, but at the feeling of Draco’s back shifting like it was metamorphosing under his hand. Remus suddenly dragged him away, holding him harshly against his chest, his arms impossibly strong. Harry didn’t understand why he was being restrained, he’d barely done anything. Not until Remus spoke.

“Stop struggling,” Remus said. “You can’t go back to him right now.”

Harry hadn’t even realized that he was fighting against Remus’s hold. The thought made him dizzy. A second later Kreacher popped back into existence. Harry couldn’t drag his eyes away from Draco though. His shaking was still present but it seemed to be slowly stopping, his breathing evening out.

“Kreacher?” James asked in a haggard voice.

“Kreacher cannot move through the Malfoy wards. They have been closed.”

“Regulus and Sirius?” James whispered.

Kreacher made a rattling sound. “Trapped.” He was gone before anyone could react. Remus let out a choke-off sob, so low that Harry was only able to hear it because he was standing against him. Harry’s world tilted as Kreacher’s response echoed endlessly through his skull.

He bent at the waist, glad that Remus let him move finally, and threw up all over his shoes.

the fool.

In Regulus's opinion, being trapped in the Malfoy Manor cellars without his wand almost immediately after Kreacher rescued Harry and Draco was the best-case scenario of what he could be encountering.

"He's here," Regulus told Sirius right after the prison-like door was slammed behind them. The cellar was desolate and cold, but it was safe for now. He wondered if Narcissa and Lucius would be shoved down there with him, or if they'd simply be executed.

"How do you know?" Sirius asked. His voice was shaking though Regulus didn't know if it was fear or adrenaline. He was leaning more towards fear, but the way Sirius instantly began pacing the perimeter of the cellar, Regulus couldn't be sure.

"I can feel it," Regulus said honestly. It was like all those years ago when he was constantly in contact with pieces of Tom Riddle's soul. The hissing from the diary and the locket still rang in his ears if he sought them out. The memory of them was too vivid to fully shake. He would live with them for the rest of his life.

Regulus didn't think he could actually *hear* the fact that Tom Riddle was nearby, but there was a darkness, a sickness, in the air that was unmistakable. It had been so long since he'd come face to face with the monster, but now he knew it was only a matter of time.

Not to mention that he felt it the moment Lucius called the man. His Dark Mark burned on his skin, fire racing up his bones and veins like it was trying to consume him before he could get away. He hadn't felt much of anything from the mark in a long time. He hadn't understood why it had returned to him when he came back from the veil, but for a while, he thought it might have been inactive. It was as if Tom Riddle himself had shut the mark off, had removed all the magic from it.

Regulus wondered if proximity was all he needed.

"We have to get out of here," Sirius said urgently. Regulus didn't have the heart to tell him that probably wouldn't be happening. He was afraid that the Malfoys would be able to stop Harry and Draco's escape, that's why he'd told Kreacher to take only them—along with the invisibility cloak, that belonged with the Potters, not with him—but the moment they made it out, Regulus knew the wards would be amended.

Elves could usually get through wards, their magic worked differently than wizards' magic, but that didn't mean wards couldn't be completely restricted. They'd done the same thing to Grimmauld and Black Manor, ensuring that even if another wizard sent a house elf to spy on them, they wouldn't be able to get through.

Lucius didn't appear to have his wand—Regulus was sure he would have drawn it had he been in possession of it—but that didn't mean he couldn't shift the wards as the owner of the house.

It was complicated magic, but if Regulus was familiar with it, then surely Lucius was as well.

When Kreacher never returned to him even as a group of wannabe Death Eaters stormed into the parlor and attacked Regulus and Sirius, Regulus knew his assumption was correct. There would be no getting out this time, at least, not with Kreacher's help. Quietly, he did not believe there was any getting out at all, but he'd accepted that the moment he'd made eye contact with James in the corridor, when James had taken the others to safety. It felt like goodbye.

Sirius didn't seem to have the same luxury. He was frantic, searching for soft places in the walls or hidden passageways concealed with a spare bit of magic. Regulus wanted to apologize to him, but he was sure any acceptance of their fate would only be met with ire, so he kept his feelings to himself.

"We have to kill the snake," Regulus said, partially to Sirius, but mostly to himself. It was just a reminder of what was left, the last assumption Regulus had made, though he was sure he was right.

"What snake?" Sirius asked distractedly.

"*His* snake," Regulus responded. "It's the last Horcrux. After the snake is destroyed, there is nothing left."

"How do you know that?"

"Harry could see through her when it attacked Arthur Weasley back before we removed the Horcrux from Harry. There is only one way that could have happened. It has to be her." He and Dumbledore had discussed the snake before as well, the thought that it could be a Horcrux didn't only come from him, but the way Harry described her in the graveyard and in the Department of Mysteries made her seem more magical than a typical animal.

Sirius finally stopped desperately searching the cellar. He blew out a defeated sigh and slid down one of the walls until he was seated on the floor, his legs stretched out in front of him. He was barely dressed, only wearing a pair of muggle trousers, a long-sleeved shirt, and a wool jacket, even his shoes seemed thrown on as an afterthought. He wasn't dressed for battle, he was dressed like he was running an errand. He was dressed for comfort, Regulus realized abruptly. He'd been at home, in the safety of Black Manor. He hadn't been fighting for months like Regulus had, he'd been safe.

"How are we supposed to do that?" Sirius asked dejectedly. "It might not even be here."

"Tom will be keeping her close," Regulus said. "I'm sure of it. As far as how to kill her..." he paused so he could kneel and very carefully remove the basilisk fang that was tucked into this sock. "We have to use this. Other than fiendfire, there is nothing else that can do the trick. We have to destroy her entirely. The Gryffindor sword might be able to kill her too, but I left that with James. I couldn't risk it being captured, so all we have is this."

“Fiendfire? Isn’t that dark magic?” Sirius asked conversationally. Regulus was surprised that he didn’t sound judgmental.

“Does it matter?”

Sirius didn’t look up for a while, but Regulus could tell he was rolling it around in his head. They would have to be quick and exacting with their movements. There was no more room for error here.

The cellar, though empty, had a certain sound to it, a humming of magic long waisted on its walls. A slow *drip, drip, drip* of water splashed along the dirt-covered floor. It was once made only of stone, but over the years, someone had tried to build upon it. Different colored planks of wood lined the center of the room, all haphazardly placed. As the floor dipped into the open cells, the walls long since destroyed, the wood disappeared and the stone remained.

Rot and blood permeated the space, the smell long since sinking into the walls. He could find no evidence of human waste or spilled blood, though it had been obvious some of the people locked down here were trapped for months on end. He wondered if magic layered into the air ensured the area stayed free of anything that could make them sick, or if the Malfoys still had elves that came down here to tend to their prisoners.

There was no natural light, though it looked like there had once been windows along the back wall, right at the top where the ceiling met the earth, but the spaces had been packed with clay, drying into brick. He pushed on a few pieces of them curiously, unsurprised when none of them moved.

They wouldn’t have been able to crawl through anyway. The spaces were too small for their adult bodies and neither of them had animagus forms small enough to squeeze through.

In the center of the cellar, one lantern hung from the ceiling. The flame inside flickered treacherously every few minutes as if the torture of potential darkness was meant to make their suffering more intense. He could feel no heat coming off of it so it must have been a magical flame like many throughout Hogwarts. Regulus wondered if it would grow dim when he and Sirius slept, or if it would burn through every hour until they were either freed or killed.

“Do you think they’ll try to get us out?” Sirius asked.

It took Regulus a moment to figure out who he was asking about. His mind first jumped to Narcissa or perhaps Lucius, but Sirius had never had a connection with either of them. He struggled to think of Remus, James, and the others. It felt like they’d stopped existing the moment he was inside the wards. He could see that Sirius didn’t feel the same. He wasn’t one to accept any trap or prison cell.

Of the two of them, Regulus thought Sirius was the one more likely to get out. He’d escaped Azkaban after all.

“Regulus,” Sirius said. Regulus thought he might have been trying to snap at him, but his voice was weak and bland.

“Sorry,” Regulus said. “Lost in thought.” He chewed on his lip and considered sitting down just as Sirius had. Somehow he couldn’t get himself to do it, he would go crazy if he wasn’t moving at least a little bit. He didn’t want to be caught off guard either. “Yes, I think they’ll try.”

“Don’t talk down to me,” Sirius said harshly.

Regulus stared at him in confusion. “I’m not,” Regulus said.

“They’re not just going to leave us here,” Sirius argued.

“I agree with you,” Regulus said truthfully. The James he knew would never back down from a fight like this, even if Regulus thought it was probably a lost cause, even if he would rather James stay safe and leave Regulus to his fate.

Sirius’s anger dropped away, sadness taking its place. “Oh, sorry,” Sirius said.

They didn’t talk much after that. Sirius seemed to spiral between anger, sadness, and hurried anxiety to escape without any input from Regulus. Regulus explored with a detachment he hadn’t felt since his final year at Hogwarts the first time around, after James had broken up with him and moved on with Lily. He’d numbed every piece of himself that year and floated through the castle like a ghost no one could see.

Regulus couldn’t say how long they were down there. It was impossible to tell how much time was passing. They couldn’t even check the time with a bit of wandless magic. Regulus was hoping they’d still be able to use it, but the cellar seemed to repress their magical cores. The only thing he could do was change into his animagus form which was a relief. He thought about attacking the first person who dared come down to the cellar after them, but he decided against it. No one on the other side knew he could turn into a bear and he wanted to keep that a secret for as long as possible.

When someone did finally come downstairs, Regulus was pressing on the bricked-up windows again. Sirius jumped to his feet, but neither of them was fast enough to evade the spells thrown at them. Regulus wasn’t sure it would have mattered either way. They didn’t have the magic to fight back, so it was only a matter of time.

The spell they were both hit with was said in another language—Regulus thought it might have been Russian—so he couldn’t recognize it. It made his limbs feel like they were filled with angry bees. He slowly fell to his knees, his arms and legs trembling as he tried to maintain control, as two masked figures walked up to him, grabbing him by the arms and dragging him out of the cellars. Sirius was being similarly dragged behind him.

That wasn’t a good sign. They wouldn’t be coming back.

He expected to feel more fear, he had to admit, but the fear wouldn’t come. Beyond the enforced numbness he was feeling, Regulus could only sense defiance and thirst for violence trying to bubble to the surface. The halls of Malfoy Manor seemed less desolate than they had earlier that day, though that likely wasn’t a good thing. There was darkness there, curling

around every corner and sneaking up behind everyone's backs. Even Grimmauld Place when it was briefly the meeting point for the early Death Eaters was not as dark as Malfoy Manor.

To his surprise, he found himself mourning what Malfoy Manor had once been. Not that he'd ever had an attachment to it, but he could picture a family trying to grow here, a young Draco finding love and happiness with his family here. Would he ever feel that again?

They were dragged into a dining room clearly meant for large, extravagant parties. Perhaps this was a party, maybe in some circles, it could be considered such a thing, though everyone seemed too drab and miserable to be truly having fun. Every person inside the room was dressed head to toe in black, many of them wearing masks or keeping their eyes glued to the dining table.

Regulus spotted Lucius and Narcissa immediately, they were sitting on one side of the table, both facing the door. Lucius's hair was knotted and dirty, hanging limply around his shoulders. Narcissa was next to him, leaning just enough toward her husband that it was noticeable to the eye. He imagined that she wanted to reach out to him for comfort but was unable to do so.

He didn't look at the end of the table where Tom Riddle sat, but he could feel him like a haunting presence. Like a swell of Devil's Snare, keeping to the cornered darkness, anxious to snatch up anything that drifted too close. The other head of the table was empty. Regulus was thrown into the seat, directly across from Tom Riddle, the long stretch of the expensive dining room table the only thing that both connected and separated them.

Sirius was tossed into the seat to Regulus's right, a typical seating arrangement for two guests. It almost made Regulus laugh. He was glad it didn't though. How would he explain such a thing?

Finally, when he felt he had no more ways to avoid what lay before him, he raised his eyes and looked directly at Tom Riddle.

The first time he'd met him, Tom had smiled almost kindly and introduced himself to Regulus as "his Lord." Regulus, too young to truly understand the gravity of what he was seeing and hearing, thought that was an odd thing to say, it was weird phrasing. He'd heard many members of his family and a few well-informed Slytherins at school refer to the man as The Dark Lord, that was the only reason he didn't make a mistake such as asking what the fuck Tom was trying to say to him.

He had a charming quality about it before. The handsomeness of his youth still clung to his features, but even then, the dark magic he'd endeavored to wrap around himself had begun to take its toll. It was impossible to miss the unusual stretch of his skin or the way his features seemed ill-formed for his face.

But Tom made up for this physical strangeness with charisma, he was welcoming and though Regulus was terrified of him, Tom treated him like a little prince. It was a confusing time.

Those small flaws were nothing compared to the way he looked now. Harry had told Regulus all about the way Tom Riddle looked post-destruction and revitalization, about the red eyes

and the slitted nose, the grey skin, and the hollow cheeks. Harry's description did not do it justice.

Tom Riddle was a monster, now physically just as much as the other sense. His skin looked like he had taken it off a corpse that had been dead for weeks, like he'd made himself a suit out of it and wrapped it around his own skull. Regulus couldn't make out any smell, not with how far away he was, but he was sure that if he could smell him, he would inhale only rotting flesh.

His eyes, once green like the moss on the forest floor, were burned red like they'd been branded from the inside. The red took up far more than a typical iris, swallowing up any form of normalcy and presenting only horror. It looked painful, Regulus thought. He couldn't imagine what kind of dark magic Tom had to do to achieve such a look. Was it the murder? Or the missing parts of his soul? Perhaps it was something so dark even Regulus couldn't conceive of it, something so demented that it was inaccessible to a normal mind.

Tom Riddle was thin, though not as thin and waifish as Regulus would have expected. His cheeks were hollow, just as Harry described, but his neck was thick like a Beater's might be. He resembled a snake, and not just because of his deformed nose, but because his eyes were tilted from how they'd once been.

He decidedly did not look human, and yet, there was still a humanness to him. A strange vulnerability sat just below the rotting skin and the red eyes, a desperation for success and safety at any cost.

Tom Riddle did not look back at Regulus yet, but already Regulus could feel the push at his mind. He'd forgotten the grave Legilimency talents of Tom Riddle. He could access nearly any mind he wanted with just a simple reach of his fingertips. Regulus's occlumency was well practiced, and his walls came up almost on their own.

"Sirius Black," Tom Riddle said. It was almost a greeting, but there was a blandness to it that kept it from holding. Sirius glared back at him, sweat beading across his forehead. Regulus didn't think it was fear that made him sweat, he figured it was the spell they'd both been victims of. Sirius was fighting far harder than Regulus was. He always had, hadn't he?

Sirius gritted his teeth and said nothing, no smart insult or petty word, just the fierce stare of an angry dog left out in the cold, starved for love and affection, recently brought in and cared for only to have it ripped from his maw.

"Your mother believed you would return to me," Tom Riddle said. His voice was uncomfortably soothing like cashmere against freshly washed skin. Regulus had expected it to be harsh or closer to how Harry sounded when he spoke Parseltongue.

"She was wrong," Sirius snapped. His hands were shaking by his sides, but they weren't moving up or down, Sirius was still frozen and helpless. The wannabe Death Eaters were standing behind both of them. Regulus could tell they weren't marked yet. The desperation of new followers who wanted into Tom's ranks was so easily spotted.

“You would make a liar of her?” Tom Riddle asked. Even with his inhuman look, he still spoke like a polite, well-educated gentleman. There was a sallowness to it like one wrong move could bring out anger so severe they would all die from it, but he seemed almost reasonable, almost levelheaded.

Sirius sneered.

“Head of House Black,” Tom Riddle marveled. “You would be of great use to me. There has always been a place for you here.”

For just a moment, in the blink of an eye, Regulus felt like a little kid again, hoping his brother would choose their family over his friends. Their mother had talked at length about what would be expected of them, their loyalty to the Dark Lord at the top of that list. The Dark Mark wasn’t discussed until right before it happened to Regulus, but once they knew that was a possibility, they could read between the lines.

Sirius had always fought back about following the Dark Lord. He said that James and his family said it was wrong, so he wouldn’t do it. Both of them were too young to fully understand the gravity of what they were being asked to do, they didn’t know that they were on the precipice of war or that death would follow, no matter the choices they made.

All Regulus knew was that Sirius was spending too much time away and not enough time at home. He wanted Sirius to agree, to follow the Dark Lord, because that meant Sirius wouldn’t ever be gone, he wouldn’t ever choose James over him. Regulus wanted to be the first choice.

It felt odd to think about that now, especially as his stomach twisted imagining his brother, now weathered by the years, kneeling before Tom Riddle, allowing him to burn his mark into his arm. It wasn’t what he wanted, of course not, but the foolish, naive boy was still somewhere inside him. The memory was so strong that for a second, he forgot that Sirius was choosing him by refusing.

Regulus had been the one trying to kill Tom Riddle. From the moment he was dragged back from that cave, he’d been on the path to this moment. Though Sirius was diametrically opposed to Tom Riddle, and he had a stake in keeping Harry and everyone else in their lives safe, there was a loyalty to the way Sirius had supported Regulus’s desire to see Tom Riddle dead.

He’d chosen all of them, but he’d chosen Regulus too. He was here with Regulus, on his side.

“Surely you’re not stupid enough to think I’d agree to that,” Sirius said, his words snapping Regulus back to the present with enough violence to make Regulus’s heart jump. The gravity of their situation hadn’t sunk in yet, but he was sure it was on its way.

Tom smirked, his grey, distorted lips pulling to the side in a mocking expression, his red eyes flashing knowingly. He barely flicked his wand before Sirius was screaming. The noise would have been horrible if Regulus wasn’t so relieved that Tom hadn’t killed him yet.

The Cruciatus Curse only lasted for a second, but Sirius was left panting and disoriented enough for Regulus to feel sick. Tom Riddle seemed bored with him though. Regulus was sure of it, especially when Tom's eyes finally slid over to Regulus's face. Sirius was only here as an audience and fodder for the real opposition.

"Regulus Black," Tom Riddle said.

"Mr. Black. It is wonderful to meet you. Your mother tells me that you've been asked to join Slughorn's club, is that true?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Tom," Regulus responded. The ghost of Tom's smirk vanished in an instant, hatred made its home in the sand of Tom's face. The grey, dead skin felt more like an omen than it ever had before.

"I've been anxious to meet you," Tom said, his voice still level. No one at the table moved, they didn't even breathe. Did they already know what would be Regulus's fate? Were they waiting in anticipation? In fear?

"Have you?" Regulus asked. It came out brattier than he expected as if he was toying with Tom. It wasn't exactly what he'd planned, but he doubted it mattered much how he acted now. The basilisk fang in his sock weighed heavy, but the snake was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was wrong about Tom keeping her close, perhaps she'd be hidden away somewhere.

"They tell me you're Sirius Black's son," Tom replied then slowly stood from his chair. He was taller than Regulus remembered, his black robes making his body look impossibly long as if dragged through never-ending fog.

"I am," Regulus said simply.

Tom smiled at this, a real smile, as if he was charmed by Regulus's poor attempt at lying. He took one gliding step to the side, then another. He was heading toward Regulus, but Regulus still couldn't move.

"Bellatrix disagreed," Tom replied, a gentle rumble to his words. "She said you were never one to tell the truth, even before. Even to me."

He almost sounded offended, as if lying to him was the biggest insult Regulus could have enacted. He kept moving toward Regulus, but at a glacial pace, his body barely reacting to the steps.

"Narcissa tells me you're friends with her son," Tom continued. Narcissa inhaled sharply, loud enough that everyone must have heard it. Tom looked at her with disdain, then with a lazy wave of his hand, he said, "Leave."

Everyone in the room sprung into action, hurrying from the dining room like they couldn't get away fast enough. Only the four wannabe Death Eaters behind Regulus and Sirius

remained, but when Tom's unsettling eyes drifted back to them, they ran. In no time at all, the room was empty except for Tom, Sirius, and Regulus.

"I was told Draco was dead, that Albus Dumbledore killed him," Tom said conversationally. If anyone had heard his words alone, they might have thought that he and Regulus were friends. "Did you hide him just as you have hidden yourself?" Tom knew who he was. He shouldn't have been surprised by that fact, but it still seemed impossible. "Just as you've hidden what does not belong to you?" Tom's voice slid into a hiss at the end of the sentence.

Regulus felt a sharp pain slide up his back, unexpected panic boiling through his bones. He kept his eyes on Tom Riddle, but he did not respond, afraid that he would slip up. Perhaps Tom didn't know anything yet. Regulus wasn't going to give away secrets if he could help it. Especially not secrets as valuable as this.

His hopes that Tom was still in the dark faded like a dying fire in a long abandoned fireplace as Tom pulled a small slip of paper from his robes, his unnaturally long nails clamping the parchment so harshly that it looked like it was seconds away from tearing.

"To the Dark Lord," he read and Regulus turned cold. Even his bones and blood felt frozen. It had been a long time. *A long time.*

Tom kept walking as he read, the words dancing from his mouth like knives thrown in revenge.

"I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret."

Tom did not look up as he read, his eyes stayed glued to the page. Regulus wondered how many times he'd read this, how long ago had he found it?

"I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more."

He finally lifted his eyes, the small slip of paper that Regulus had written on so many years ago burned to ash in Tom's grasp. It had vanished, but it didn't matter. The damage was done.

"You have stolen from me," Tom said. "And worst still, you remain *alive*."

Regulus shivered violently, the spell that had been cast on him was finally beginning to dissipate, but he still couldn't move fully, just enough to shift in his chair. He couldn't bring himself to look at Sirius at first. He hoped that he was having more luck than Regulus was. But then Tom glided forward a few more steps, close enough that he was directly behind Sirius, and with a slithering motion, he lifted his hand and touched the back of Sirius's head.

"Don't touch me," Sirius growled. Tom only smirked.

"I've always had an excellent memory," Tom said, glancing down at Sirius. He touched him almost gently as if he was a friend or a lover. Regulus knew it was mocking, a threat. "You

look very much the same as you did the last time I saw you. I remember visiting you in your —” he paused, making a face like he was fighting a smile, “childhood bedroom.”

Every word he spoke made Regulus feel sicker. He finally dropped his hand from Sirius, something overtaking the cloying aspect of his words. He lunged forward, faster than Regulus thought he'd be able to move, and bent at the waist so that he and Regulus were eye to eye. Regulus didn't want to look at him, but he couldn't drag his eyes away.

When Tom lifted his hand and touched Regulus's face with one cold finger, Regulus flinched.

“How is it that you still look so young?” Tom breathed.

Regulus should have seen this coming. Tom's obsession with living forever was his most documented trait in Regulus's world. He'd been hunting the cursed object that kept Tom alive, he knew what this man was after, yet he hadn't expected Tom's fascination with Regulus's youth. It did not bode well for the future, but Regulus wondered for a second if it would be possible to leverage that information long enough to get access to the snake.

Then again, Tom Riddle now knew that Regulus was aware of the Horcruxes. Although, based on his phrasing, he might not know that not only Regulus had already been successful at destroying the locket, but most of the other remaining objects.

“I will find out either way,” Tom said, but the words weren't aimed at Regulus. They weren't a taunt or a threat like Regulus might have expected. They were self-soothing, a deference to himself.

Tom stepped to the other side of him, moving behind Regulus's chair as he did it and finally freeing Regulus from their uncomfortable eye contact. He wasn't wearing shoes, Regulus realized, though he didn't know what to make of that information. Tom grabbed him by the wrist and pulled his arm up until it was on the dining table. As he dragged up Regulus's sleeve to reveal his forearm, Regulus wondered if Tom was going to cut his arm off. The thought was lacking the panic he was sure he should have been feeling.

Tom rubbed his cold fingers over the mark, his touch soft like he was caring for a child.

“I'll find out either way,” he said again, a touch of madness there now. Then he pulled a wand from his robe and lowered the tip until it was placed against the Dark Mark.

Regulus did not have time to think about what was about to be done to him, not before the pain began.

the fool part II.

Chapter Notes

to any non-american readers who were posting on tiktok during the ban complaining about american writers and fans of the marauders fandom, i genuinely hope you're ashamed of yourself. americans are having their rights restricted by the american government and many american marauders fans seek out these stories and fan stories in general to express things that are becoming more and more dangerous to express publicly in this country.

to my american friends and readers, i don't know what the future holds for us. these are scary times we live in as our country falls further right and deeper into fascism, a tale so similar to the ones we choose to read and write about. i'm afraid for everything to come and im not sure what solace i can offer you beyond a story that brings me feelings of community and comfort in dark times. take care of each other, look out for your friends, and stay safe. i love you guys.

The pain transcended time. It burned through Regulus's body like a vengeful storm, breaking down his core and all of his limbs, remaking him into something unrecognizable. He screamed and screamed, his throat going raw, torn until there was nothing left and no more noise could come from him.

Distantly, he noticed Sirius finally free himself from the spell and tried to help, but Tom Riddle would not be stopped on his tirade. Regulus had betrayed him, he'd stolen from him, and he'd hidden Draco and Harry from his grasp. Worst of all, Regulus had cheated death—not once, but twice—and that more than anything was the biggest insult.

If Harry was the one he wanted dead, then Regulus was the one to incur his punishment. Regulus could taste Tom's wrath on his tongue, he could feel his magic boiling his blood, and he could sense every moment of disappointment that Tom had ever felt. It was as if he was living it for him, suffering in a way Tom was incapable of living through.

The mark on his arm slithered like a living being, he could feel it under his skin like a parasite came to eat him from the inside out, and though he tried to fight against it, he couldn't stop the way his body responded.

In the moments when screaming became far too difficult and his body realized it couldn't get away, Regulus began to shiver and vomit, bile swelling up his throat and spilling out from between his clattering teeth. He was blinded by pain, destroyed by it.

He was nothing, nothing, *nothing*.

The pain never stopped, it merely dulled enough for Regulus to notice the cold bleeding in through his clothes. He thought he might have been actually blinded for a moment before realizing that he was lying somewhere very dark. Only a small body of warmth made him feel like he was still alive, a comforting bit of fur pressed up against his side and a snout resting across his stomach.

“Am I alive?” he asked, curious if his voice would still work. His throat felt like it had been sliced up until it was a pill of discarded meat. His voice came out rougher than usual, but it was still there, he could still talk.

Sirius moved his head slightly, but he didn’t transform back to answer him. Regulus wanted to look down at him, to make eye contact and remember that for the time being he wasn’t alone. He was so grateful they were both still alive. He hadn’t expected to leave that dining room, not in any state let alone well enough to use his brain.

His body seized suddenly, all of his muscles tensing at once. A pained noise spilled unbidden out of his mouth, just a small, helpless groan. Sirius pressed himself a little closer like he was trying to layer himself into Regulus’s skin. It provided some solace, but not enough to escape the pain. Most worrying was the feeling emanating from his forearm where the mark still crawled along his skin. It felt it had been burned to a nub. He expected to lift his head and see nothing beyond a snake reclaiming his arm.

After far too long, the seizing stopped and Regulus was able to relax back into the stone ground. The dirt was a small comfort against his aching back, providing just enough padding to protect him from the unforgiving cold.

Sirius made a huffing sound, his head felt heavy on Regulus’s stomach, but Regulus didn’t dare complain. They lay there for what felt like hours, Regulus’s body seizing and releasing off and on every few minutes until he lost consciousness. When he woke sometime later, he was wrapped in Sirius’s jacket and his head was propped up on Sirius’s leg.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus croaked. Sirius was human again, but he felt unnaturally still. His breathing was too shallow for him to be asleep. A moment passed and then Sirius’s hand came down to rest against Regulus’s side.

“For what?” Sirius asked. His voice sounded odd, tight, and restricted like he was practicing speaking in another language as if English was unfamiliar to him.

“For getting you trapped here,” Regulus said, sorrow and regret filling him like an overflowing well.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Sirius didn’t sound like he was lying, but Regulus couldn’t be sure that he was telling the truth either. It was Regulus’s fault. He’d sent everyone else to safety except for Sirius, he’d kept Sirius by his side even when that wasn’t fair, even when he deserved to go home.

Regulus pulled one of his arms out from within Sirius’s jacket—his right arm, he couldn’t bear to look at his left arm yet—and reached up to scratch his nose. It felt like he was in the

early stages of a cold, his nose just starting to get irritated. In the dim light of the cellar, he caught sight of the bruises that littered his forearm, the ones that James had left behind the last time he'd held Regulus down on their bed.

It had felt so comforting then like James was keeping him close and safe, like he was keeping him from floating away, and the bruises felt like love buried into his skin. Seeing them now brought tears to his eyes. Would they still be visible to him when his soul left his body? When Tom Riddle left him a corpse, would the lackey charged with destroying his body be able to see the evidence that he'd once been loved?

His throat felt tight as a sob threatened to spill out of him. Sirius must have felt it because he started to rub Regulus's shoulder comfortingly. It made Regulus feel worse. He felt like he didn't deserve it.

"Awake again?" Sirius asked though he must have already known the answer.

"Barely," Regulus replied, not because it was true, but because he wished he wasn't awake at all. He wished he'd just fall back asleep and stay that way.

"No one has come down to check on us yet," Sirius said conversationally. "What do you think they're waiting for?"

All of Regulus's thoughts felt sluggish. "I don't know. I thought he'd just kill me."

Sirius paused before responding. "Do you think he knows about the locket?" he whispered.

"That I destroyed it?" Regulus whispered back.

"Yes."

"I can't be sure, but I don't think so. I'm not sure what tipped him off, or if he's gone to search for any of the others."

Sirius made a clicking noise with his teeth like he was gnawing on the thoughts in his head, shaping them into something easier to digest before letting them out. "He seemed very interested in your appearance," Sirius said. Regulus was horrified to hear a suggestive tilt to his words.

"Ugh," he groaned. "Don't say it like that." His body spasmed, but it wasn't as bad as it had been earlier. He wondered if he would be able to walk if he tried.

Sirius snickered softly. "Why not?" he asked. "You're the one who was writing him love notes."

Regulus's muscles spasmed again, only seconds after the first ones, and a moan of displeasure escaped through his gritted teeth. "It wasn't a love note," he grunted.

Sirius's hand was gentled on his side, the other one coming to rest in his hair like he was trying desperately to soothe him. His words, in contrast, were nothing but mocking. "*To the Dark Lord*," he said in a high-pitched voice.

“I do not sound like that,” Regulus whined.

“Oh, I'm forgetting the rest. *I know what color bloomers you wear and all your other secrets.*”

Regulus sat up just enough to punch Sirius hard in the leg. Sirius huffed in pain, but Regulus was hurt far worse. He used his left hand, the one he'd been afraid to look at, and pain shot down his arm so intensely that he felt like it was melting off. He shouted, falling back to the floor and curling up in a ball as if to protect his mangled arm.

He finally looked down at it. His hand looked the same except for the wounds his fingernails had left as he'd clenched his fists during the torture, but the Dark Mark looked horrific. It was sunken into his arm, through the skin and tendons, making his forearm look half the size of his undamaged one.

“What did he do to me?” Regulus whispered, rattled by what he was seeing.

Sirius swallowed loudly, moving off the wall so he could kneel in front of Regulus, his worried eyes appearing from behind his stringy hair. It had looked fine before they were taken from the dining room, but now it looked like it was braided with sweat and dirt.

“I've never seen anything like it,” Sirius said, his eyes growing distant. “It was like the snake on your arm came to life, like it was poisoning you. You were—” He winced. “It was so much worse than the *Cruciatus*.”

“It feels like the *Cruciatus Curse* now,” Regulus said, his muscles spasming right on queue. His teeth clattered together loudly this time. “I can feel it in every part of my body.”

Sirius nodded. “I know,” he said. “You were shaking for over an hour when they brought us back here. I didn't know if you would wake up, or if you were really unconscious. It was like you were here and gone at the same time.”

“Why didn't he just kill me?” Regulus gasped, pain shooting through him again. The only source of comfort was Sirius slowly rubbing his back.

“He wants to know how you survived,” someone said. It took Regulus a moment to realize it wasn't Sirius, though the voice wasn't similar at all. Regulus wanted to jump up and prepare for an attack, but he couldn't get any part of his body to respond.

Sirius didn't have the same issue. He was transformed in an instant, his teeth barred, a snarl echoing off the cellar walls. Narcissa looked afraid but she didn't step away or cower.

“How I survived what?” Regulus asked roughly.

“He knows you were dead enough that everyone believed it. Bella and I—we had a funeral. Your father was too sick to go but Walburga came.”

“Did she cry?” Regulus asked without meaning to. Narcissa looked torn. He wondered if she was weighing the odds of lying to him. That told him everything he needed to know, but she ultimately told him the truth.

“She didn’t,” she said regretfully, “but I knew she was mourning you.”

Regulus pondered that, trying to imagine his mother grappling with his disappearance and death. He struggled to see it. She’d been sad when Sirius left, though she was careful not to show it. She left Sirius’s room untouched, a tomb to her son. Regulus was sure that was grief even if she never spoke his name again.

“What did you think happened to me?”

“We didn’t know,” Narcissa said. “There were rumors that the Dark lord killed you for betraying him, though I can’t say where those rumors came from. I know some other followers noticed you were... reticent to participate in raids.”

“They thought I was soft.” *I was soft*, he almost added.

“They never knew what to make of you.”

“They still don’t,” Sirius grumbled. Regulus hadn’t noticed him transforming back.

Narcissa eyed Sirius carefully. It was odd to see them face to face. When they were all little, Sirius was often compared to Bellatrix. They had similar temperaments and the same wild, untamable curls. Both of their mothers had tried to use nearly corrosive potions to try to soften those curls into sleek waves and both Sirius and Bellatrix had exploded with accidental magic so strong that it almost made their curls sentient.

If they were a less proper family, Regulus was sure those would have been happy memories shared fondly among relatives. As it were, they were all miserable, and Walburga and Druella only saw the accidental magic as defiance that needed to be corrected.

Sirius and Bellatrix also played the same, they interacted with extended family members in the same way, they had the same sharp jawlines and wide eyes. If they’d been closer in age, they would have been mistaken for twins.

Sirius still had some of Bella in him, Regulus could see it in moments of stress when Sirius started approaching the madness that only Bellatrix could truly perfect, but now that he was seeing him with Narcissa, he could finally see the family resemblance.

They had the same nose, eye color, and ears. They even had a similar build, the same sharp shoulders and long torsos. Regulus hadn’t thought much about Narcissa, especially not as a member of his family, but it was impossible to miss how similar they all looked to each other, the same ties that had been corroded over a lifetime.

“Yes,” Narcissa agreed quietly. “They still don’t.” She looked away, her already sallow face growing even paler. “Some of them have been making bids to deal with you themselves, but the Dark Lord has not budged. You’re not to be killed until he has what he needs.”

“And what about you?” Sirius growled.

Narcissa glanced his way, her face falling into blankness that looked startling and striking.
“What about me?”

“Why are you down here? Are you going to try and get that information out of him?” Sirius demanded. Regulus finally stopped shaking from his muscle spasms and pushed himself up until he was seated against the wall. Everything still hurt, but he wanted a clear view of Narcissa’s face. He wanted to know what she was thinking.

“I came to bring blankets,” Narcissa said simply. Up until that moment, Regulus hadn’t noticed that she was carrying something. It looked like thick grey fabric folded over her forearms. “They won’t let me stay down here for long, and I wasn’t able to grab any food or water, but I’ll try again later.”

“Why?” Regulus asked.

Narcissa raised her eyebrows questioningly.

“Why are you helping us at all? Why bother coming down here?”

“You may have forgotten given your propensity to hide the fact that you’re still alive from me, but we are still family.”

“No. We’re not,” Sirius said. “You’re not anything to us.”

“Sirius,” Regulus warned, mostly because he was rather cold and he was sure those blankets would help settle his angry muscles long enough for him to sleep a bit longer.

“She stopped being our family a long time ago, but letting her husband call Voldemort when Draco and Harry were still trapped here should tell you all you need to know.”

Narcissa flinched violently at the name and for a second, Regulus thought he felt a pressure at the wards, but he couldn’t be sure.

“How could either you do that to him?” Regulus breathed. He’d forgotten about Lucius touching his Dark Mark. It felt like it had happened years before, so distant in his mind that he could barely see it clearly. “I thought you loved him. He’s your son. You should have protected him.” All thoughts of getting those blankets left him as he remembered how devastated Draco looked when he found out he wouldn’t be returning home.

“We do love him,” Narcissa said sharply. “I would think you of all people would understand that. Lucius was just trying to protect him.”

“By offering up another teenager on a silver platter?” Sirius asked angrily.

“You must have known that Tom would punish him for faking his death, maybe even kill him,” Regulus said at the same time.

“He would have forgiven him if he’d—” she cut off so abruptly that her final word echoed harshly around them.

“If he’d given up Harry,” Regulus supplied hatefully.

“You’re a coward,” Sirius said. He sounded just as he had all those years ago when he would fight with Regulus, the same hurt and devastation in his words, like he’d always hoped for something better. “Just like the rest of them. You won’t even protect your own son from that crazy man.”

“What would you have me do, Sirius?” Narcissa asked, straightening her back so she stood just a bit taller, a move so similar to one Draco would pull that Regulus almost laughed. “He’s taken our wands, he lives in our home, what other choice do we have?”

“You could help us kill him,” Regulus whispered.

“What?” Narcissa breathed, scandalized.

“If he’s dead, he can’t hurt you anymore. Any of you.”

“Regulus,” Sirius said lowly. He was nervous that Regulus was going to give them away, but Regulus didn’t care. If they didn’t do something, then they were going to lose. Again. Regulus might still die, Sirius might also, but if Tom Riddle could be killed, then everyone would finally be free of him. It was worth dying for. It was all those years ago, and it was now.

“He cannot be killed,” Narcissa said.

“He can,” Regulus responded. Narcissa stared him down, fear so evident on her chiseled features that it seemed like it would become permanent if she didn’t grow some courage. Regulus stared back at her unwavering. He’d made the change, he’d found his own reason for killing Tom Riddle. If he could do it, so could she.

It felt like an eternity passed before she spoke again, and Regulus kept wondering if someone would bother to come looking for her since she wasn’t supposed to be down here for this long in the first place. When she finally responded, it felt like the entire world shifted.

“How?” she asked simply.

“Regulus, we can’t trust her,” Sirius said instantly.

“She would do anything to protect Draco,” Regulus argued.

“She still thinks Voldemort is going to save him.”

Regulus thought he’d convinced her already, but he could see Sirius’s point. He glanced back at Narcissa who was watching them impassively.

“We need her help,” Regulus said quietly. *Help me convince her*, he begged with his eyes. Sirius looked unhappy and for a moment, Regulus was sure he was going to refuse, but then something clicked behind his eyes, an idea settling into place.

“Do you know about Draco?” Sirius asked almost tauntingly as he turned back to look at her.

“That he’s alive?” Narcissa asked sarcastically, the words ‘*That you stole him from me*’ layered right underneath what she’d said.

“He’s a Veela.”

That brought Narcissa up short, it was clear she hadn’t been expecting it. Regulus, on the other hand, was so focused on her that it took a long moment for him to register what Sirius had just said.

“He’s what?” Regulus asked.

“He’s a Veela,” Sirius repeated. “A full one. He has wings and everything.”

“Wings?”

“That’s not possible,” Narcissa interrupted to say.

Sirius smirked triumphantly. “It’s true. I’ve seen them. He says he got it from dear old Lucy.”

“Lucius isn’t a pureblood?” Regulus gasped.

Sirius laughed. “And do you know what the best thing is?” Sirius continued, his eyes boring into Narcissa’s. “The only way for him to present like this is if he met his *mate*.”

“His mate?” Regulus asked softly, his head spinning.

“This isn’t possible,” Narcissa whispered.

“Do you have any guesses on who that might be?” Sirius taunted.

“Sirius, please, for the love of Merlin, are you fucking with us?” Regulus asked, his chest growing tight.

Sirius gave him a slightly pitying look as he shook his head. “It’s true. I was there when he started to change. It was—It was terrible,” he said quietly, the words meant just for Regulus although there was no way Narcissa didn’t hear them.

Regulus stared up at him as the words slowly sunk in. All at once, memories of little Draco at Hogwarts seemed to line up in his mind, all the odd times he’d caught Draco out in the middle of the night, the weird ways he would talk about Harry, the way his face would transform and grow sharp. It all made sense now.

“Who’s his mate?” Regulus asked, though he already knew. Sirius smiled, a genuine one this time before he turned back to Narcissa.

“What do you think, Cissy?”

Narcissa still looked frozen in shock, but she blinked twice like she was trying to break free. “Who?” she asked.

“Harry James Potter,” Sirius said with a dramatic flare that even Tom Riddle himself couldn’t replicate.

Narcissa placed a hand against her chest, her breaths coming a bit too quickly. “My son—Draco—and that boy?”

“You wanted to give him to Voldemort.” Sirius shook his head in disappointment. “Do you have any idea what that would have done to Draco? He would have died trying to save Harry, he may have very well died the moment Harry did. We have no idea.”

“I need to sit down,” Narcissa said.

“Are you going to help us or not?” Regulus demanded. He couldn’t let her leave, not until he knew. He didn’t know how long they had. Narcissa looked shocked that he would ask such a thing, but surely now she understood their urgency. Her son was tied to the one person Tom Riddle wanted dead more than any other.

“I—I’m not sure,” Narcissa whispered. “He’ll kill us.”

“He might kill you anyway,” Sirius said with a shrug.

Narcissa looked like she was being pulled apart, every piece of her stretched thin. She glanced up at the cellar stairs, a quiet solemnness on her face, then finally looked back at them with something like acceptance.

“How do we kill him?” she dared to ask, her voice shaking.

“We have to kill the snake first,” Regulus said. His fingers shook as he reached down toward his ankle, and he blew out a breath of relief when he felt the basilisk fang still tucked snugly against him. He pulled it out, unwrapping it from the dragon hide it was swaddled in, and held it out for her to take.

She didn’t seem to want to approach him at first, but when she finally did, her hand was shaking worse than his.

“It’s the only thing that can do it,” Regulus said. “Hit the snake with this and we can kill him.”

“I’m not sure if I can do it.”

“Then give it back,” Sirius said. “And leave us be.”

Narcissa very nearly did, Regulus could see the indecision on her face. He couldn’t say what made her decide to pocket the fang, if it was her love for Draco or if something else convinced her to make that final decision, but by the time she left the cellar, Regulus was wrapped in one of the wool blankets and the fang was long gone.

“Do you think she’ll actually do it?” Sirius asked about half an hour after Narcissa left. It must have been getting dark outside because the cellar was growing colder by the minute.

Sirius and Regulus were pressed up shoulder to shoulder, the blankets wrapped around both of them to try and stay warm.

"I don't know," Regulus said with a sigh. "There was no way I would be able to do it, not with the way my body is now, and they're not just going to let you wander free. At this point, I see no other option."

"Maybe Remus and James will come to do it for us," Sirius said with a soft smile.

Regulus laughed once through his nose. "Maybe," he said.

Sirius let silence fall around them for a long moment, then said, "So..."

Regulus waited for him to continue, and when he didn't, replied, "So?"

"You and James?"

Regulus nearly shoved away from him, a knee-jerk reaction he only barely resisted. His mouth felt too dry to respond for a moment. Finally, he whispered, "Yeah."

Sirius hummed thoughtfully but didn't reply.

"Are you upset?" Regulus asked.

"Why would I be upset?"

Regulus almost didn't want to answer. It was odd to feel so old, so worn and weary from the world, and still so young and so vulnerable, like anything Sirius said against him would rip out every piece of himself he liked. When he responded, he sounded even younger than he already felt.

"I know you always like Lily more than me."

Sirius froze next to him, then slowly pulled away. Regulus regretted the loss of warmth, but he didn't fight it. "What did you just say?" Sirius asked.

Regulus's face felt tight. He rolled his eyes and shrugged, working his hardest to play it off. "Forget it," Regulus said quickly.

"You think I like her more than you?"

"I said forget it." Regulus turned away from his brother and slowly lowered himself to the cellar floor. He was exhausted, his body ached worse than it ever had and all he wanted to do was sleep. He did not want to have a conversation with Sirius that would just hurt his feelings.

For a moment, he thought Sirius would just let it slide. His hopes were dashed when he heard Sirius clicking his teeth together.

"You know," he said, sounding far away. "Lily was kind of like a sister to me."

Regulus squeezed his eyes closed. He would not get offended by Sirius's words, even if it felt the same way it always did when he called James his brother.

"Her sister was horrible to her, Petunia, you know her." Regulus knew she mistreated Harry, there wasn't much else he needed to know. "And Lily didn't have a lot of friends. I don't know. We just met at a very opportune time, I guess."

Regulus didn't reply. He wasn't sure what he would say anyway. It seemed useless to try.

"She and James made so much sense to me. I always thought they were supposed to end up together. I remember thinking at their wedding that this was exactly what was meant to happen."

Regulus considered turning into a bear and slashing Sirius's stupid face open. He'd just been tortured by Tom Riddle, couldn't that be enough for today?

Sirius sucked in a sharp breath. "I wasn't paying close enough attention though," he continued. "I didn't see how James felt. I knew he cared about Lily and to me, that meant they were in love and would always be in love, but I never noticed how torn up he was at Hogwarts or especially after you died. I was too busy caring about myself to notice anyone else."

"Can you wrap this up?" Regulus grumbled. "I'm trying to sleep."

Sirius sighed. "I guess what I'm trying to say is..." Regulus heard him shift around slightly. "My friendship with Lily was separate from her relationship with James. It was definitely different than my relationship with you. Lily knew me pretty well, but never—not as well as you do."

"I don't know you as well as James does," Regulus said even though he knew he shouldn't be entertaining this.

"Maybe not," Sirius said. "But James... well, James is the best person I've ever met."

Regulus felt a sharp pain sear through his chest and he wondered if he would start convulsing again. It would be a welcome change to his current circumstances.

"I'm glad he ended up with you. You two deserve each other."

Regulus shook slightly, tears fighting to escape his closed eyes. He turned on his side, facing the wall, and let the grief of James's absence take him for a moment. He tried not to cry about it, it wouldn't do him any good right now, and he tried not to let Sirius's stupid words make him feel any more than he was already overloaded with, but it was a struggle.

Sirius didn't speak again. After a moment Regulus heard the sound of paws walking across the cellar floor and then felt a warm dog lay with his back pressed against Regulus's. He drifted off to sleep thinking about James and about what either of them deserved.

He didn't know much, but he was sure James deserved better than this.

Maybe, if he tried really hard, he would deserve better too.

the chariot.

They used a portkey to take them back to Grimmauld Place. James had forgotten about the portkeys completely, even though he'd been the one to make the most of them. He wondered if they would have been useful to Regulus and Sirius, if he should have left the bag behind when Regulus tried to give it to him.

"Regulus isn't going to be happy that we brought people here," James said uneasily as Remus shared the location of Grimmauld with Dean, Luna, and Ollivander. James didn't know when Remus had become secret keeper, he thought it was still Sirius, but given he'd been obliviated of the location, he didn't know much at all.

"He'd want them to be safe and I don't know where else to take them," Remus said testily. He was biting at his words like he was trying to withhold something, trying to keep it back from where it threatened to spill out of him. He'd been doing that since he first laid eyes on James, and James didn't understand why yet.

"Is my father still alive?" Luna asked blandly. There was a bruise on the side of her jaw like she'd taken a rough fall down the cellar stairs. He wondered how she'd managed to stay sane down there. Was that where Regulus was right now? He could only be so lucky.

"I'm—" Harry said awkwardly, shooting a look at Hermione.

"We're not sure," Hermione said sadly. "I think so."

Luna's eyes looked far away but she nodded like she understood. "Luna," James said. "Why don't we get you a change of clothes? I can show you where the bathroom is if you'd like a shower."

She smiled at him. "Okay, James," she said.

"Who is that?" James heard Dean whisper to Harry. He didn't hear his reply, already heading up the stairs with Luna in tow. They didn't have any clothes for women in the house, but there was still a closet full of Sirius's old clothes and that would have to work. He found a pair of denim and an old muggle band shirt, handing them to Luna as he pointed her toward the bathroom.

"How exciting," Luna said, inspecting the clothes. "I've never worn anything this odd before."

James wanted to laugh, he knew what Luna usually wore, but he couldn't find it in himself to even crack a smile. Once he heard the shower water running, he descended the stairs to find the others. Remus, Draco, and Ollivander were all missing from the living room, and Harry, Hermione, and Dean were locked in a tense conversation.

They all fell silent when they spotted him.

“We need to get Regulus and Sirius out of there,” Harry said roughly. He looked different than the last time James had seen him. He was a little bit older, his jaw sharper and more defined, a small dusting of facial hair coming in in patches. James hadn’t been able to grow facial hair until he was twenty, and even then, he didn’t live long enough to be able to grow a beard like his father wore.

There was something different about Harry’s eyes too. He seemed more serious—a grave change given he was already far too serious for his young age—and more determined. James had expected him to look scared or apologetic, but he wore defiance on his face like armor. He stood like he was ready for a fight.

“How? They’ve locked the wards. I don’t know how we’re going to get back in.”

“There has to be a way,” Hermione said, eyeing Harry nervously for a moment.

“The only way anyone left that cellar was if they were dead,” Dean said grimly. James felt himself flinch, the harsh truth from such a young person felt like fire raining down around him.

“We should ask Draco, he might—”

“I’m not letting him go back,” Harry said, and wasn’t that a change? His words were as stiff as his back, the angry expression on his face looked like revenge and something James hadn’t seen there before. It looked like Remus when Sirius first tried to join him during the full moon. James hadn’t understood what it was then, too young and inexperienced to catch the way Remus’s eyes darkened at the thought of Sirius getting hurt because of him.

“James,” Remus said suddenly, shaking James from his racing thoughts.

“Yes?” he asked. He sounded dazed like he wasn’t fully in his body. Maybe he wasn’t. He hadn’t stopped to take stock yet.

“Can I speak with you?” Remus asked gravely. James nodded, leaving Harry and the others to their plotting. He didn’t think they’d come up with a way to get back into Malfoy Manor, but he only hoped that if they did, they’d consult with James and Remus before doing anything rash. Remus led them into the library, it seemed so barren though none of the books had been removed. James could sense that no one had been in there in months, its emptiness made him ache for Regulus.

“What is it?” James asked. Remus looked momentarily surprised by the question like he expected James to already know.

“How did it happen?” he asked after he seemed to get a grasp on himself.

“Hm?” James wondered vaguely, tilting his head slightly. Remus was searching his face for any indication that James knew what he was asking, but James just felt lost. “How did Regulus and Sirius get stuck?” he asked.

“No, James,” Remus said, shaking his head frustratedly. “How did you get bitten?”

Dread and surprise shot down James's chest like the first sip of cold water after a long drought. "What?" he breathed.

"I can tell," Remus said, though that much was obvious. "It must have been recent. Does Regulus know?"

That made James laugh, a shocked gasp spilling from him. "How would he not know?" James asked through his chuckles. He couldn't help but imagine trying to hide his newly gained werewolf ability from the man he spent every moment of his day with.

Remus's eyebrows furrowed. "You don't seem—I'm—when—" Remus seemed distressed, though James didn't fully understand why.

James finally stopped laughing, though it took him a moment to get the smile off of his face. "It was too full moons ago. I think the one in January? I don't know, I haven't been keeping up with the date very much."

Remus's mouth dropped open. "Why didn't either of you tell us?"

James felt a sting of pity. Remus sounded hurt, and he hadn't expected that. "Regulus knew you both would want to help and that would put you in danger."

Remus frowned. "You still should have told us," Remus said.

"I'm sorry," James said, though he wasn't sure if that was true or not. "We didn't want to worry you."

Remus sighed tiredly, rubbing his eyes for a moment. "No, I know. I'm just—I'm just sorry. Do you know who the werewolf was?"

James shook his head. "Regulus scared him off after I was bitten and he never came back."

"How was the transformation? I can barely remember my first time..." he trailed off, his eyes going hazy for a moment.

James almost felt bad about his answer. "It was fine," he said. Remus's gaze snapped up to meet his. "I mean the whole bones breaking thing wasn't pleasant, but I got through it. And Regulus was there the whole time, including when I woke up the next morning."

"Do you have any new scars?"

"Nothing besides the initial bite mark," James said almost regretfully. "My wolf he—erm—he loves Regulus. Apparently, he was quite playful."

For the first time since they'd started this conversation, Remus broke into a smile, his expression somewhere between relieved and entertained. "Of course, I should have guessed."

James rubbed his neck sheepishly. "Yeah, it wasn't so bad," he said. "I wasn't expecting all of the other changes though. That's been a bit odd, but I've managed."

“What other changes?” Remus asked curiously, sounding more like a professor than a friend.

“Well, I’ve been quite... interested in Regulus after the full moon, and I swear my cock has gotten bigger.”

“Excuse me?” Remus gasped.

“No, I’m serious. Here, look I’ll show you!” James reached to unbutton his trousers but Remus stopped him.

“No, thank you!” Remus said loudly. “I do not need to see your cock, James.”

“Oh!” Hermione said suddenly, both of them turning to look at her in surprise. “I didn’t mean to interrupt anything,” she said awkwardly. “I just wanted to let you know—” She cleared her throat uncomfortably.

“What’s wrong?” Remus asked urgently.

“Draco might have an idea,” Hermione said and the spark in her eyes made James hopeful.

Draco stood just far enough away from Harry that Harry couldn’t reach out and touch him, Remus noticed once he and James reentered the living room. He wasn’t sure where Draco had gone when they’d arrived at Grimmauld but he was glad that he was back.

Luna was still missing, likely scrubbing the dirt out of her excessively long hair. Remus guessed that would take a while. He tried not to think about it too much though. He liked Luna a lot, had since the first time he met her while he was working as a professor. He’d heard more than one student call her Loony Lovegood and had instantly felt a kinship with her after his time dealing with a similar nickname. It felt so wrong that she would be a victim of the insanity between the Death Eaters and everyone else.

Ollivander was the only other person missing now besides Luna, but if Remus had to guess, he would say that he was upstairs taking a very long, well-earned nap. He looked near death when Remus saw him outside of Malfoy Manor. Honestly, he was a bit surprised to see that he was still able to walk. It seemed almost impossible given how horrible he looked. His words shook as he explained what Voldemort had taken him for, what he was looking for.

“The Elder Wand,” Ollivander told Remus as Remus showed him to one of the guest bedrooms. “He believes it is the only thing that can help him kill Mr. Harry Potter.”

“Has he found it yet?” Remus asked, choosing not to dwell on the fact that Voldemort was supposedly looking for a magical item that most thought was nothing more than a myth. Was he really getting so desperate? Remus wanted to believe that his desperation was a good thing, but he knew that it only made him more dangerous than before.

“No, sir,” Ollivander said. “He has not.”

Remus didn’t push for more information yet. He was curious, sure, but they had bigger problems, and Ollivander looked like he was already fighting to stay awake and Remus didn’t

want to keep him any longer.

“I’ll be right downstairs, please let me know if you need anything,” Remus said. Ollivander smiled wanly, his eyes already sliding closed as Remus closed the door behind him.

“There are several secret passages in and out of the Manor,” Draco said formally. “I’ve only found a few, but I would guess there are a lot more that I don’t know about. There is one that leads all the way to the property line, several acres south of the manor.”

“Won’t that still be covered by the wards?” James asked.

“Not the entrance to the passage,” Draco said, “but maybe halfway through. I can’t be sure. I might be able to get through though. Maybe I can find my father and get him to lower the wards.”

“No,” Harry said loudly, his eyes burning. Draco looked momentarily pleased before his face fell into a frown.

“It’s not up to you,” Draco said, his eyes shifting around like he was trying desperately to remind Harry that they had company. Remus was almost embarrassed for them, two young boys who didn’t yet know what they were to each other or what to do about the massive feelings they both harbored.

“You’re not going back,” Harry said, unmoved by Draco’s plea. Draco was looking between with a bewildered expression. Remus could only imagine what he was feeling.

“Is there another way to lower the wards? We have that object Sirius used.”

“It might work,” Remus said with a half-shrug. “But there is also the possibility that now that Lucius knows about it, the wards will block it. We have no way of knowing until we’re there.”

Hermione hissed in pain suddenly, drawing all of their attention. She reached into the front pocket of her trousers rapidly like she was trying to rid herself of something, then pulled out one of the charmed Galleons she had made for them. She glanced at it with widening eyes.

“What is it?” James asked in a rush. “Is it Regulus?”

“No,” Hermione said. James’s face fell.

“Sirius?”

“It can’t be,” Remus said. “I have the Galleon that Sirius uses.”

James’s eyebrows jump. “Oh, that’s right.” He touched the bag that was attached to his side. “I have Regulus’s too. Who else has one?”

Hermione looked faintly embarrassed, her cheeks glowing red. “I gave one to Ron,” she mumbled, almost under her breath.

“Ron has had one the entire time?” Harry asked. “How come he hasn’t used it?”

“He has,” Hermione said, the redness on her cheeks spreading up to her hairline and down her neck. “There is a way to send messages to only one person. He doesn’t send a lot of messages, but he’s sent a few.”

Harry was making a face like he was mad she didn’t tell him, but he didn’t say anything.

“What does the message say?” James asked, though he looked a little nervous like he thought it might be private. Remus wondered how much he knew about Ron and Hermione’s friendship. Remus only knew a bit about them, he and Hermione mostly talked about schoolwork together, though she came to him often at Black Manor. He guessed that she was lonely, having only Harry and Draco for comfort wasn’t always the most ideal. Still, with his limited knowledge, he knew something was going on between the two teenagers.

Hermione’s eyebrows furrowed. “It’s just one word. *Fiendfyre*.”

Harry nearly got left behind when they went back to Malfoy Manor. Hermione was asked to stay back with Ollivander, Dean, and Luna and though she didn’t look happy about it, she agreed without much argument. Draco had to go though, he had to show them the entrance to the secret passage into the manor. If things hadn’t been so dire, Harry would have found the fact that Draco’s childhood home has secret passages like Hogwarts to be extremely cool and interesting. Instead, all he could focus on was the fact that Draco was going to walk right back into danger and Harry was going to have to sit at Grimmauld Place and twiddle his thumbs.

“I’m going with you,” Harry said. “You can’t stop me.”

He knew they were trying to protect him, maybe there was even a small part of them that was irritated with him, but he didn’t care. They didn’t get to choose what he did, not anymore, and he wasn’t going to sit on the sidelines, not when other people were in danger, especially Regulus, Sirius, and Draco.

“Harry, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Remus asked. Harry felt a flare of irritation at the man. He always sounded so reasonable, but that didn’t mean he made the best choices. Just because someone knew how to make something sound good, didn’t mean they were right. Though Harry respected and loved Remus, he wouldn’t be swayed.

“Yes, I am sure,” Harry said, lifting his chin. He expected Draco or James to argue with him too, but James was just watching him with a measured expression—for a moment, Harry thought he looked proud, but he couldn’t be sure. Draco, on the other hand, was watching Harry and was clearly irritated. His eyes looked a bit too bright as he stared Harry down, and something in Harry’s stomach twisted. He thought it should have been fear, the inhuman expression Draco was wearing a clear warning, but instead, it just made Harry want to tackle him to the ground. It made him hungry.

“Should we go now?” James said right as Draco opened his mouth to say something.

Draco shrugged slightly, but his mouth twisted with discomfort.

“Do you have another idea?” James pressed, there was kindness in the way he deferred to Draco. Harry felt a mixture of pride and jealousy seeing it, though both of those emotions were overpowered by the realization that he’d missed his father. Sometimes it felt like James was still dead, like Harry had still lost him. They were so different from each other, and it always felt like there was a disconnect there, but at the same time, it was so easy for Harry to trust him.

“They might have guards at the edge of the wards. I think I overheard them talking about having one of the elves looking out for anyone lurking. It might be better to go at night. Maybe it’ll make us less visible?” Draco said, his shoulders straightening as he spoke, growing more confident with every word.

“That’s a good point,” James said.

Remus looked thoughtful. “They’ll probably still be able to see us,” he said slowly, then added, “When are the house elves the busiest?”

“How would I know that?” Draco asked dryly. Harry hated that his bratty attitude made him want to laugh now.

Remus’s lips twitched slightly so he thought he might be in the same boat.

“What if we ask Dobby?” Hermione said suddenly. “He used to work there.”

“That’s a good idea,” Harry replied. “I’m not sure how to get in contact with him though.”

“Perhaps Kreacher could find him,” Luna said. Harry jumped slightly, he hadn’t noticed her reentering the room. Her blonde hair was still wet, only the very tips dry enough not to drip on the floor. She was wearing what must have been Sirius’s old clothes, making her look like a muggle. It made something in him soften. He’d missed Luna just as he had his other friends, and seeing her again, though under terrible circumstances, had comforted him.

“How do you know about Kreacher?” James asked curiously.

Luna smiled kindly at him, her eyes sparkling as if to say *‘How do I know about anything?’*

James must have understood because he laughed and said, “Good point.”

“Only Sirius and Regulus can call Kreacher though.”

“Actually,” Hermione said, “Kreacher was freed. Regulus asked me to help set up a tracking spell so he could still call him since Kreacher is no longer tied to the Black family.”

“Why was he freed?” Remus wondered, but no one else seemed to know. Only James’s face was carefully blank.

“How does that help us then?” Draco asked. “It’s not like we can call him either.” He shot a rogue glare Harry’s way and Harry wondered if Draco was thinking about the time Harry had

freed Dobby in second year.

“James should be able to call him too,” Hermione said.

“Me?” James asked, obviously shocked.

Hermione nodded twice. “Regulus asked me to include you. I’m sorry, I thought you knew.”

“Huh,” James said thoughtfully. “I wonder why,” he whispered.

“Are you going to try it?” Draco asked shortly. James gave him a curious look and something unspoken crossed between the two of them. Harry had wondered about Draco’s relationship to James more than once, they’d apparently spent a lot of the summer together before Harry and the others officially moved into Black Manor, yet Draco refused to talk about him.

“Kreacher,” he called. Harry was relieved when a soft pop sounded, Kreacher appearing right next to James. He seemed a bit disgruntled as he looked around the room, but Harry was surprised to see that when his eyes finally landed on James, they were filled with respect. Sirius had told Harry more than once that Kreacher had always loved Regulus the most.

“For a while, Kreacher was Regulus’s closest friend,” Sirius had told him. “Actually, that might still be true.”

That friendship must have extended to James now. It was strange what Regulus’s love could do, how it could fold others into it. It was exactly what had happened to Harry, everything he had now was because of Regulus. He wouldn’t let him down now, not when Regulus was the one who needed help. He’d brought him back from the dead once, saving him from the hands of Voldemort should be no problem at all.

Remus apparated them to the edges of the manor’s grounds just after dinnertime. Dobby, once Kreacher had found him, had said that was when all the elves would be busy cleaning and prepping everything for breakfast. Draco shivered the moment they landed, the cold air from the setting sun making his skin feel like it was being pierced by knives. It was unseasonably cold, but the moment they landed, he could feel the residual magic of dementors clinging to the grass. His magic was far more sensitive than usual since his transformation. Sometimes it was so intense that it gave him head and body aches.

It was also how he knew that James was now a werewolf. The moment they’d come in contact with each other, Draco could feel it wafting off him. *Good*, he thought like a knee-jerk reaction. The petty child inside of him was still angry that James and Regulus had left him at Black Manor with a bunch of people he disliked. It didn’t matter that he sort of liked all of them now. He was still mad, he still felt a little discarded.

Later, he was sure he would feel guilty about the way his emotions turned vengeful upon discovering James’s newly acquired secret, but for now, he reveled in them.

“Where is the entrance?” Remus asked. It was just the four of them in the trees—Remus, Draco, James, and *Harry*, who refused to stay behind even though he was practically useless

and also the Dark Lord's number one target—but it still felt like it was too big of a group. They were definitely going to get caught, Draco thought.

"I'll show you," he said. He'd discovered this particular secret passage during his last summer before starting Hogwarts. He'd asked for a new broom for his birthday, but his father had refused, saying that he would get him one if and when he made the Slytherin Quidditch team. He'd bought him one only the year before anyway, not that eleven-year-old Draco cared about that.

It was a few weeks after his birthday and Draco was bored out of his mind. He'd been at Crabbe's house the night before, but he and his parents were about to go on a trip to Sweden and Draco had not been allowed to go. His mother was throwing some party for the summer solstice and she refused to let him leave the country when he was expected to be in attendance.

So he was bored out of his mind, Goyle having left on the trip as well, and Pansy having not yet returned from France and had taken to flying around the manor's grounds to keep himself entertained.

He was never allowed to go farther than his mother could see him, those were the rules, but most of the grounds were low enough that he could fly for a good while before he was hidden from her. However, today he didn't care much for the rules. His mother would be in meetings all day with her party planners and she probably wouldn't remember to come looking for him, so he intended to use his old and useless broom to test the boundaries of where he could go.

He flew over the forest that overlooked the manor for a while, dipping into the trees to hide himself periodically and practicing dodging their branches to improve his flying, but every time he came back up, the grounds were still empty and he knew he hadn't been found out yet.

Next, he flew along the lake that sat at the very back of their property, past the gardens and the labyrinth. He swam in that lake periodically, though he was only allowed to use it if Dobby was there to watch him. He was a strong swimmer, but his mother was terrified that he would accidentally drown if she wasn't watching him. Draco didn't think he needed a babysitter. He almost wanted to swim now just to spite her, but he knew that Dobby would likely find him quickly and the game would be up.

He moved onto the far edges of their property, the places that were over a few hills, far enough away that he would have to fly for a good five minutes before his mother could see him again.

Unfortunately, that rebellion only kept him interested for so long and soon he was even bored of breaking that rule. He started doing tricks on his broom, or attempting to, but when he tested the Wronski Feint—he was sure he could do it if he just tried, professionals did it all the time, and he was sure he was just as good as them—he messed up his final moment and instead of pulling away from the ground just in time, he crashed right into the dirt, flying off his broom and sliding several yards before stopping.

He laid flat on his back for a while, sure he would never tell a soul, before slowly standing, his body now covered in cuts and bruises. His mother would definitely know something happened.

It was on his walk back to find his broom that he'd found the secret passageway. It wasn't a typical entrance guarded by rocks or a cave perhaps, instead, it was just a hole in the ground, only a few fallen leaves and overgrown roots blocking it from view. He fell through right as he grabbed his broom, crashing to the ground hard enough to hurt himself.

He cried out in surprise and pain, and when he saw where he was, he mounted his broom and sped out of the hole, terrified that he was about to be eaten by a random creature whose home he'd just invaded. That night he'd been lectured for flying irresponsibly and he'd had his broom taken away from him, but once it was returned after the summer solstice, the first thing Draco did was head back to that hole in the ground, his curiosity replacing his fear.

It took a while for him to find it, but when he did, he carved a rune he found in a book into one of the trees nearby so he'd always be able to find it.

It had taken a few visits before he built up the courage to drop back into it, and a few more visits after that, before he finally walked the entire length of the passageway, leading right to the greenhouse attached to the manor.

It was the first secret passageway he'd ever found, but it wasn't the last. He would have never guessed he would be using it for this though.

"Wow," James gasped as he dropped into the hole Draco showed him. His voice sounded echoey like he was at the bottom of a well. Draco knew the passage wasn't that deep underground. "This is amazing!"

Remus shook his head, it was clear he was fighting a smile. Draco just barely managed an eye roll. He wouldn't let go of his irritation. Not yet.

Harry dropped down next, shouting for James to move out of the way just moments before he threw his legs over the side. Draco felt a sting of urgency when he heard Harry hit the ground, the monster inside of him urging him to lunge forward to help him. He managed to stop himself but it was a close thing.

"You can head back to Grimmauld or even Black Manor if you want," Remus said softly, low enough that Draco was sure Harry and James wouldn't be able to hear him.

"What? Why?" Draco asked.

"You should never have been asked to come back here, especially with the danger it poses to you. You said the passage leads straight in so we don't need you to help us get through anymore. We can find it ourselves. Plus, with the Fiendfyre, if we can manage to cast it, things are only going to get more dangerous."

Draco stared at him for a moment, his thoughts tumbling around his head like the magic inside a Bludger. "I can't leave Harry here," Draco said. "Surely, you know that. Why didn't

you say this before Harry went in there?”

Remus, to his surprise, laughed. “You’re right,” Remus said, slightly chagrined. “I didn’t think —”

Draco waved him off. “It doesn’t matter. Harry wouldn’t leave Regulus and Sirius here. He was going to come no matter what. He’s...” He debated not saying the next part, but Remus looked so curious that he couldn’t stop himself. “He’s upset that he’s been kept out of things. You’d have to lock him in prison to keep him from getting involved now.”

One side of Remus's lips turned down in a frown. Before he could respond, James’s voice came floating up.

“Are you two still alive?” he wondered.

Remus tried for a smile, but he looked worried now, forbidding was starting to weigh on all of them.

“Watch out, we’re coming down,” was all Remus said. He gestured for Draco to go first. Draco took just a moment to look around at the trees he used to know so well, the mark he carved into one of them still unusually visible. He wondered if he would see any of it again.

When they dragged Regulus and Sirius from the cellar several hours after Narcissa left them, Regulus finally realized that he could walk on his own. He was surprised by how well his shaking legs held him, though of course after only a few moments, the men who’d come to get them started to drag him anyway. He could walk, thankfully, but not very fast, and not nearly as fast as they wanted him to.

He wished that Sirius wasn’t with him. If he was set to be tortured again, then he would prefer to do it with some element of privacy. Despite how weird it sounded, he found it embarrassing that someone he cared about had to watch him experience such pain. It was humiliating, just as it had been in childhood when his mother would punish him.

Tom Riddle wasn’t alone today, but it wasn’t the huge meeting it had been the last time they were brought up. He couldn’t see out any of the windows, all the curtains were pulled tight over them, but he wondered if it was evening. The smell of food still clung to the room and the only meal Regulus could imagine them eating together was dinner.

They weren't put in seats at the dining room table this time. Instead, they were tossed onto the floor and manhandled until they were both on their knees, Tom Riddle lording over them. Narcissa and Lucius were there again, only a few inches apart just like last time, but their eyes were glued to the floor, neither of them looking up when Regulus and Sirius were thrown to the ground. No one was sitting at the table anymore, though many of the seats were pulled back like they’d just recently stood up.

Regulus didn't recognize anyone else, but he noticed that none of them were wearing masks. To his surprise, right next to where Tom Riddle must have been seated at the dining table,

was the snake curled around the chair legs. Regulus tried not to stare at it, but his heart was pounding the moment he saw its scaly skin.

Tom Riddle seemed like he was trying to look at Regulus with disdain but there was a barely disguised hunger there that was impossible to miss. He wanted something from Regulus, Regulus already knew that, but he was determined to get it this time. He wouldn't stop at anything.

There was a lot that Regulus remembered about Tom Riddle from the brief moments he'd met him before, but there was one thing that Regulus had forgotten about, likely because it bored him so much the first time. That was the fact that Tom Riddle loved to hear himself talk.

He started asking Regulus questions by prattling on for nearly ten minutes uninterrupted. Regulus almost wished for torture just to end this nonsense. He wasn't even saying anything useful, he was just talking. It was a nightmare. Of course, it was only going to get worse.

"Bellatrix's death was one thing," Tom said, seeming genuinely sad for a moment. Regulus was sure he was just disappointed to lose someone so powerful and useful, he doubted that Tom Riddle cared about anyone more than he cared about himself. He doubted he cared about anyone else *at all*, even Bellatrix. "But then you took Rodolphus and Rabastan as well. They were loyal to me to the end."

Regulus heard the words Tom Riddle wasn't saying. Rodolphus and Rabastan may have been loyal, they'd gone to Azkaban professing that Tom would return one day, but they weren't useful, not like Bellatrix was. They weren't powerful or clever, they offered nothing beyond brute force. Tom Riddle didn't value them very highly, that much was obvious.

"Even their vaults were removed," Tom Riddle mused. He was fishing, Regulus thought. He likely knew what was hidden in those vaults, but he was trying to see if Regulus knew.

"They didn't deserve them anyway," Regulus responded, the sharpness in his tone impossible to remove.

Tom Riddle's red eyes zeroed in on him and Regulus only had one second of warning before Tom was invading his mind. He was a nature Legilimens, far more adept than the average wizard, but it was different to feel the full force of his power. It was overwhelming and sickening, turning Regulus's stomach even as every part of him worked to hold up his Occlumency walls.

He'd thought he was good at it before, but now he could feel them shaking under the onslaught. He started dropping pieces of his memories, pulling back his protection so that only the most important memories would be kept secret. When Tom Riddle finally released him, all the memories about the Horcruxes were still safely kept behind his walls, but his nose was bleeding and his vision was blurry, he felt like he'd been invaded, he felt sick and disgusted.

"You are nothing," Tom said, the words coming from him almost unbidden, as if he'd only meant to think them. Regulus wondered how often he lost control like that, the destroyed

Horcruxes and the years of dark magic must have taken their toll.

Once again, Regulus heard more than what Tom said, all of his words carried more meaning than anyone would guess. It was as if he was trying to say as many things as possible with as few words spoken. Regulus didn't mind, every piece of information he could glean from the man was useful to him.

With those words—*you are nothing*—Tom was giving away the game.

He doesn't know about the other Horcruxes. Not yet. He had no idea that Regulus knew there was more than one, that he'd already found all but one, that he'd destroyed all but one. Tom Riddle would need to search for and check the safety of the others, which would slow him down. Though Regulus was sure he wouldn't ever leave Malfoy Manor, he knew that buying everyone else time was still a good thing.

Tom made a clicking sound with his tongue, it almost sounded like a bone breaking, and it sent a shiver down Regulus's spine.

"If you will not tell me what I need to know..." His voice faded, the unspoken threat standing for itself in the silence. He lifted his wand, and for a moment, Regulus was sure he was going to be tortured again. He nearly dragged his damaged left arm up to his chest as if that would protect him, but before he could move, Sirius was screaming.

Regulus had almost forgotten he was there with him. The moment he'd seen Tom Riddle again, he was the only thing Regulus could focus on, but now Sirius's sounds of pain were drawing him away, making him feel like a little boy again.

"No," he breathed, the ingrained desire to fight for this to stop making him speak against his will. He physically halted the rest of his begs from spilling out, biting harshly down on his tongue until he tasted blood. Begging wouldn't stop Tom Riddle, if anything, it would likely make it worse, it would egg him on.

When Sirius finally stopped convulsing from the torture, his eyes were closed. Only the slight movement in his chest told Regulus he was still alive.

"Tell me how you came back," Tom Riddle demanded. The others in the room stood so still that they looked like they were muggle paintings, just background for the torment they were forced to bear witness to. Only a few of them looked pleased, with small triumphant smirks on their lips, but most of them just looked terrified or completely disconnected from what was happening around them.

Regulus didn't answer, he didn't say a single thing. Tom made that clicking sound again and without a word, Sirius was screaming again.

Sweat dripped down Regulus's face, his body shaking with fear and anguish. Sirius's pain felt like it was spilling over the sides of what he could handle and trickling over to Regulus. Regulus risked one small glance at him. Sirius's body was moving so aggressively that his head kept banging against the dining room floor.

He's going to kill him in front of me, Regulus realized. Though the thought had occurred to him distantly, and he already knew for certain that neither of them would be making it out alive, it was different seeing it for himself.

Selfishly, he wished he could be the one to die first. He didn't want to live in a world without Sirius, not again, especially not if all that was left for him was a slow torturous death at the hands of Tom Riddle.

Twice more Tom Riddle asked, and twice more, Regulus refused. Every refusal was punished as the ones before. However, when Tom Riddle asked and was refused a third time, he decided on a different approach. Sirius wasn't moving much at all anymore, his breathing shallow. He'd barely screamed the last time and Regulus was sure Tom was growing bored.

He hit Regulus with the torture curse quickly, the pain only lasting a few long minutes before he stopped. Regulus only had time to take one breath in before Tom was reentering his mind, tearing at his walls with a violence that felt unbeatable. He was lucky he'd worked so hard to improve his Occlumency skills because he was sure he would have collapsed under the weight of Tom's magic before. Another few secrets did escape him though, small ones, little hints, and one very important detail.

It was Tom himself, except he was much younger, only about sixteen or seventeen. For a moment, when present-day Tom pulled away, Regulus thought it was a memory he'd seen in Dumbledore's pensieve but then he realized that it was one of his own, one that had been layered over with false memories created by the diary.

How bizarre, he thought vaguely. At the time, when the part of Tom's soul in the diary was possessing him, he'd only had access to memories of James, ones that had felt like warped dreams. James had been there, but not really, but then again...

Regulus hadn't thought about that time in a long, long while, but now that his thoughts drifted back, he realized that James really had been there, he'd been in those memories, some part of him had been pulled forth by the magic Tom Riddle had embedded into the diary. It was as if Regulus's magic, his soul, had dragged James from beyond the grave just enough to see him in a memory.

He almost wished he had more time to revisit those moments now, but there was something else more pressing.

He knew that diary Tom was using his body while he dreamed of James, he knew he'd been possessed, but he hadn't realized that some part of his brain was taking in those memories as well, even if he couldn't see them at the time.

Only Tom Riddle's Legilimency could bring them to light.

It hadn't been Tom Riddle controlling all of his limbs like he was living inside Regulus's body, that's how Regulus had imagined it at the time, instead, it was Tom Riddle, the young, handsome diary version, coercing a dazed and lost Regulus through the castle, instructing him to do his bidding. It was closer to the Imperio.

The Tom Riddle that stood in front of him looked shocked, it was perhaps the first time he'd looked that way. The others in the room looked more afraid than they ever had before.

"Who are you?" Tom asked accusatorially.

Tom must have known about the diary's destruction, he must have realized that Lucius had tried to get rid of it, that the Chamber of Secrets had been reopened, and that the diary was destroyed, but the question didn't lend itself to that. It seemed like Tom thought he was far older than he already seemed, he was looking down at him like they'd met when Tom was actually that age, like they'd gone to Hogwarts together.

Tom made a strange hissing sound for only a second then lifted his wand again. Regulus waited for the pain to start, or for his memories to be invaded again, or even for Sirius to start screaming again, but just as Tom made that odd clicking sound again, there was a much louder noise from somewhere else in the manor. It almost sounded like the winds of a hurricane, like rain swelling off the coast, rain hitting water so aggressively that any sound beyond it couldn't be heard.

The room was spinning when the sound started, and though Sirius knew it likely meant danger, he couldn't bring himself to care. His body hurt and his mind felt dull like an overused knife. He'd been looking at Regulus the last time the pain had stopped, but he was facing the opposite direction now and he didn't have the energy to turn back over. He stared at the dining room doors, they looked like they'd once been elegant but now the wood was littered with spell damage and scratch marks like people had tried to escape straight through them.

He couldn't imagine his home being turned into such a horrific display of darkness. For all of Narcissa's flaws, he never thought she'd be the type of person to allow this sort of thing in her home.

Though he knew she and her useless husband were likely as much prisoners here as Sirius and Regulus were, that didn't mean she wasn't complicit in letting this all begin. He thought he'd given up on hoping for anything good from his family, but he was surprised to feel disappointment when he thought of Narcissa. She'd never given any indication that she'd be different than the rest of the Black family, but still, he'd hoped.

He wished he could turn that part of himself off, he wished he could stop hoping.

You were right about Regulus, something whispered in his brain. He supposed that was true, he'd hoped that Regulus would come back to him, he'd hoped that his little brother would choose him over their family. It had taken years but he finally had. Sirius should feel grateful for it, but he was afraid that all it did was make him wish for the same thing from everyone else who was still here.

He hadn't noticed how much his thoughts were drifting until he came back to himself and found the room in chaos. Shouting and rapid conversations were echoing off the walls, Voldemort was instructing someone to go see what the noise was, and Regulus... Regulus was silent. Sirius couldn't hear him at all.

Sirius gathered up his energy, whatever he could find remaining in his bones, and started to turn his head so he could look at his brother, but right before he managed it, the doors to the dining room flew open.

Remus stood beyond them, angry like a storm touching down to earth, magic swelling around him powerfully. Sirius was on his feet in an instant, not even sure how he managed it. His legs shook, his body protested, but Sirius was already moving.

A fight broke out around them, it swelled and crashed like the ocean as Sirius moved toward Remus. He would have turned back to get Regulus had he not seen James there, already rushing for him. Remus caught him in his arms, and for only a split second, it was just the two of them, relief like Sirius had never felt swirling inside him.

“Here, take my wand,” a voice said. It took a beat for Sirius to realize it was Harry, his disembodied voice no doubt coming from underneath the invisibility cloak. His hand appeared out of nowhere, a wand held tightly in his fist—Sirius took it without a second glance, and turned to join the fight.

Regulus and James were right next to one another, though they were facing away from each other, James locked in a fight with two of the men who’d dragged Regulus and Sirius up from the cellar, and Regulus shooting spells at Voldemort with a proficiency that would have made their grandfather proud.

Voldemort looked almost bored deflecting them, but Sirius thought they were coming too fast for him to fight back. A few others were heading toward him and Remus, but Remus was already moving forward to engage them. Sirius searched the rest of the room in the brief moment before he had to fight back, his eyes snagging on Narcissa and Lucius.

They were standing against the far wall, neither of them engaged in the fight, but Narcissa... she was watching the snake.

Sirius reached over and squeezed Remus’s shoulder, a silent plea to stay safe and a reminder that he was there, that he’d be back. Remus barely nodded and Sirius moved, knocking out one Death Eater as he rushed to the other side of the room, deflecting as many spells as he could muster. Narcissa was going to try and kill the snake, Sirius had to help her.

Right as he reached the table, standing right across from Narcissa, their eyes met. She’d lifted them just briefly, clearly aiming to see what Voldemort was doing, but she’d caught sight of Sirius first.

Now. Sirius mouthed the word, not bothering to see if Lucius was watching them, if he’d noticed or cared. Sirius only cared if he tried to stop them.

Together, he and Narcissa moved up opposite sides of the ridiculously long table, rushing forward to catch the snake who’d yet to move from its place under the chair. The snake only seemed to notice them at the last second, lifting its head slowly. Sirius thought, foolishly, that it wasn’t going to fight back, that it was too caught off guard, but when they were only a few steps from the snake, it lunged.

First at Sirius, just enough to make him jump back, throwing up a shield, then at Narcissa, going right for her wrist. She cried out in pain as the snake pulled back again, the basilisk fang flying out of her hand. Sirius had just enough time to cast another protego charm to keep the snake from slicing into her throat. She turned away from it, edging around the wall as if to run around the other side of the table so she could make for the door. Sirius twisted to find the fang, it had slid farther than he expected, and was now right at the feet of Lucius Malfoy.

He'd barely moved off the wall after his wife, maybe only a few steps away from where Sirius had last seen him, but he was staring down at the fang like he thought it might attack him. Sirius rushed forward, hoping to grab the fang before Lucius noticed him, but then Lucius's eyes shot up and he started rushing forward to.

Lucius grabbed the fang right out from under Sirius's reaching hand. Sirius didn't even have time to panic or try to get away before Lucius was moving. He thought he would try and swing the fang at him, to hit him with the venom. Lucius had never tried killed him before, but there was no telling what he was capable of.

Instead, Lucius shoved him roughly to the side and jumped forward. Sirius couldn't believe his eyes, but Lucius was trying to kill the snake, he was going after it. Years later, he would wonder if Lucius only did this to defend his wife who was still trying to run from the deadly creature, but in the moment, all Sirius could do was watch as Lucius brought the fang down only inches away from the snake's body.

He thought they might get lucky, that Lucius just needed one more swing to catch the snake, but then Voldemort caught sight of them. Sirius could see it all playing out, Voldemort killing Lucius on the spot for trying to kill the snake, maybe killing Narcissa and Sirius as well. That belief was the only thing that made him reach out and pull Lucius away right a bright green curse came flying past them, shattering into the wall behind them.

Narcissa was curled in the corner now, holding her wrist against her chest, but the snake had abandoned fighting any of them and was already slithering back to its master. The moment it was in his grasp, both of them were gone, apparating away in an instant. Sirius blew out one sigh of relief just as Remus ran toward him.

"We have to move now!" He was pulling something out of his pocket. Sirius recognized the small piece of fabric, it must have been a portkey.

"The wards will tear us to pieces if we try to portkey out of here," Sirius yelled.

Remus cringed, but Draco was the one reply, appearing beside them from below the invisibility cloak. Sirius had no idea he'd been there, why had they brought Draco?

"Mother, Father," he said, his voice strangely formal given what was happening beyond them. "You're coming with me."

"What?" Sirius said, desperately lost.

"Harry?" Remus asked, rather than objecting like Sirius thought he might.

“He’s with Regulus,” Draco said through gritted teeth. Sirius stood, his vision too blocked by the dining table to see the rest of the room, but he couldn’t catch sight of Regulus, James, or Harry. “They’re gone already. The fire—”

His word was cut off by what Sirius assumed he was about to warn them off. He’d only seen Fiendfyre one time, and in a very controlled display when he was a child. It was exceptionally dark magic and if left untamed, it would destroy everything in its path. That’s what it was doing now, Sirius realized, as it barreled through one of the walls.

“Mother, please,” Draco shouted, fear evident in his voice. Narcissa and Lucius shared one small glance before moving forward, reaching out to grab the portkey Remus held right as Sirius and Draco did the same.

“*Portus*,” Remus yelled, and in an instant, the five of them were whirling away to safety.

the chariot part II.

The street was deathly silent when James, Regulus, and Harry landed, the portkey yanking them right out of Malfoy Manor as three different Death Eaters noticed Harry Potter standing there out in the open. They arrived on a muggle street in London, Regulus thought, but he couldn't figure out where they were exactly. The location pulled at something in his memory, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Oh, I forgot that Remus obliviated you," Harry said after a moment, he was watching them with a measured, curious expression. Regulus tilted his head in confusion before Harry's words clicked in his head.

"He made us forget what was here?" Regulus asked.

Harry nodded. "He told me about it a few weeks ago. He said there was no way you would show back up randomly because you didn't know where we were living. He had to tell James where Grimmauld was when we came back earlier."

"Ah," Regulus said. "That makes sense. We were trying to keep you as safe as possible. Of course, we had no idea you would leave on your own."

Harry looked slightly embarrassed, and a little bit irritated. "We should have been more careful, but you shouldn't have kept me there knowing that the rest of the world was going to shit."

Regulus's eyebrows jumped halfway up his forehead. "What do you think you should have been doing instead? Were you supposed to be out here killing Death Eaters?"

"Maybe, yeah!" Harry said loudly. "I shouldn't have been hiding away like a coward."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "You're hardly a coward if you didn't know what was going on. If anything, I'm the coward."

Harry gritted his teeth. Regulus wondered if he'd take the bait and lash out a bit more. "I won't go back and wait it out. And I'm not leaving the country. I know you wanted me to."

Regulus shook his head. None of that mattered now. They were so close, and Tom Riddle would hunt Harry down anywhere he went. He wouldn't be safe until Tom was dead.

"Merlin forbid someone tries to keep you safe," Regulus muttered angrily.

"I wish people would stop! They just end up hurt or dead! I don't want to live with any more death on my conscience!"

"Okay, let's take a breath," James intervened to say. "Harry, no one's death is your fault."

“Mum’s is,” Harry said immediately. James flinched. “Your’s was. Regulus’s was, the second time around.” James seemed at a loss for words.

“You’re taking blame that belongs to someone else,” Regulus said. “I understand you want to help, but blaming yourself for everything Tom Riddle does isn’t doing any good.”

“How do you know?” Harry asked roughly.

“Because I have lived my entire life blaming myself and it never fixed a single thing. All it's done is make me miserable. I don’t want that life for you, just like I didn’t want you fighting a war at seventeen. None of us wanted that for any of you.”

Harry looked conflicted, and James was still pale and silent. Regulus just felt drained. Every part of him felt like it was melting from his shaking bones, his mind was dampened from exhaustion and torture, but he wasn’t going to let Harry keep blaming himself for something that wasn’t his fault. If there was one thing he was always going to do, it was make sure Harry was okay.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said finally. “We shouldn’t have left. We were just trying to help.”

“I know,” Regulus replied, relieved enough that he felt his knees give out. He only remained standing by willpower alone. “I’m sorry I’ve kept the state of the world from you. You’ve given up more than enough to help everyone else. I didn’t want you to feel guilty into doing more.”

“What if I want to do more anyway? Are you going to stop me?” Harry asked tentatively.

Regulus watched him carefully, but he didn’t get a chance to answer because just as he finally opened his mouth, Narcissa, Lucius, Remus, Sirius, and Draco came crashing to the ground across the street from them. It seemed like the world stood still for a full second before everyone was moving.

“Draco,” Harry said quietly, moving forward like his body had a mind of its own. Regulus went to cross the street with them. He needed to check on Sirius after what he’d been through today and to see why he’d brought Lucius Malfoy along with them. Regulus held Harry’s wand in his hand, but he wished he’d had his own.

He was halfway across the street when Draco cried out. “Mum!” he yelled as Narcissa collapsed backward, her body shaking violently. Regulus ran the rest of the way toward them.

“What happened?”

“The snake bit her,” Sirius gasped, kneeling next to her. Lucius was on the other side, his face drawn with panic.

“Do we have something to treat snake venom?” Remus asked quietly.

“Yes,” Regulus said instantly. “I do. James!” James was next to him in a second, already handing him his bag. Regulus used Harry’s wand to summon the vial of anti-venom he’d had

Snape make for him all those years ago. He knew it would come in handy one day. “Hold her arm still.”

Sirius reached out to grab her, but Lucius stopped him. “I’ll do it,” he growled. Though he looked at Sirius hatefully, he touched Narcissa with impossible gentleness as he pulled her arm away from her chest and held it out for Regulus to treat the bite. It was already growing black from the venom, but after a few drops of the potion, it began to lighten. It was bleeding quicker, Regulus noticed, but he hoped that would stop once the venom was gone.

“Did she—” Regulus started to ask quietly. Sirius shook his head.

“The snake got away,” Sirius said.

“Damn it,” Regulus hissed under his breath.

“Do you mind?” Lucius snapped.

“Why did you bring Lucius?” Regulus asked, not even bothering to lower his voice. Sirius’s face lightened, a snicker spilling out of his mouth.

“Because I asked him to,” Draco said quietly.

Something in Regulus softened, he looked up at Draco who was bent at the waist, his eyes glued to his mother. “Of course,” Regulus said. “I should have known.” He looked up at Remus. “Can we go inside now?”

The energy inside Grimmauld felt far stiffer than it had been in years. It reminded Regulus of the first time he returned to the house after his first year at Hogwarts with Harry, when he was met with nothing but stilted silence and tomb-like still air. It was suffocating then, and somehow, it was even worse now.

Lucius was sitting on his couch next to Narcissa who was staring at her injured and recently healed wrist. She would have a permanent scar but it was better than being dead. Draco was sitting on the other side of her, but he wouldn’t look at either of them. Harry was on the very opposite side of the room, his arms crossed angrily, as he kept shooting glares at Draco’s parents. Draco wouldn’t look at Harry either.

The only person he would look at was Remus, which Regulus found peculiar. There was something unexpected to the looks he kept giving him as if he was waiting for Remus to tell him it was okay, that he hadn’t messed things up or done something wrong. When Regulus had left, he’d hoped that Draco would adapt to his new life, at least for the time being. Originally, he’d thought James would be there to smooth things over a bit, but when James came with him, he’d only hoped that no one got injured at Black Manor.

He hadn’t expected for Draco to attach himself to Remus and Sirius. Regulus supposed the Veela thing might have facilitated things a bit, though it was hard to tell. He was still struggling to wrap his head around that point.

Hermione, Dean, and Luna were sitting on the other couch, Luna looking between everyone in the room with a curious expression. She looked better than she had in the cellar, brighter and definitely cleaner. Regulus hoped she didn't suffer too much, but he could see bruises peeking out of some of her clothes and that worried him.

Hermione looked worried, her eyebrows drawn together as she glanced between Draco and Harry. He wondered if she knew about the Veela thing. She was clever and very observant, she might have figured it out, but Sirius hadn't said anything about her being told. Apparently, even Harry didn't know, though it was obvious he knew *something*.

Dean just looked far too entertained. Regulus hated that he'd been caught up in all of this mess.

Sirius stood next to Remus, near where Draco was sitting. He shouldn't have been standing, Regulus thought. Not after what he'd gone through earlier. He should be lying down, preferably in a hospital bed.

Maybe he should be doing that too. He looked down toward his damaged arm, now covered by the sleeve of his shirt. He could still feel his hand okay, but he worried that he might lose it after everything was done. He'd never seen dark magic like what Tom had done to him. He wondered distantly if it would kill him. He was still kicking around for now, but who knew what the future held?

James was pressed up against his side, the two of them standing in the doorway. He was reassured to feel the warmth coming off of his body. He'd thought he would never see him again. He almost couldn't believe it, but he also couldn't dwell on it. Not until they were alone.

"What happens now?" Dean asked. He was the first one to break the silence, and it somehow made everything feel even more stiff.

"Are you just going to let them stay here?" Harry asked accusatorially. It wasn't clear who exactly he was talking to as he looked at every adult in the room before glaring at Lucius and Narcissa again.

"They're my parents," Draco said darkly.

Harry bit down hard on his bottom lip, his glare turning into hurt before he stormed out of the room. Draco watched him go with a conflicted expression, the darkness from earlier twisting with desperation.

"Draco," Regulus said softly. Draco looked so young when he glanced over like a little kid who thought he might get thrown out of school for making one mistake. "Do you remember the room you stayed in last time you were here?" Draco nodded. "Why don't you take your parents up there? Your mother needs to rest." His eyes drifted up to where Sirius was leaning heavily against Remus. "We all do."

"Okay," Draco said quietly, shooting one last look at Remus who nodded kindly.

“Lucius,” Regulus said right before the three of them left the room, “if you leave this house, I’ll assume you’ve betrayed us. Do you understand?”

Lucius looked almost too tired to argue, his eyes slid to his son’s face before he glanced back with a resigned expression. Once the Malfoys were gone, Regulus said, “Remus, take Sirius upstairs. He looks like he’s about to collapse.”

“You’re only using one leg to stand!” Sirius accused. Regulus wanted to snap back before he realized that Sirius was right. He was barely standing. He hadn’t realized.

“Remus, please, for the love of Merlin,” was all he said in reply. Remus didn’t laugh but Regulus was sure it was a close thing. To the rest of the people in the room—all teenagers, Salazar, they were so young—he said, “Please don’t go anywhere. We all need rest before we figure out our next move.”

“We’ll stay here,” Hermione said solemnly. Regulus really wanted to believe her but given her track record, he wasn’t sure that he did.

“Kreacher,” he called. He hadn’t planned to bring him back here, but at least Black Manor was still a safe haven. When Kreacher appeared, he added, “Please take care of everyone.” He lowered his voice to a whisper, “And alert me if anyone leaves.”

“Yes, Mas—Yes, Regulus,” Kreacher said. “Regulus is injured.”

“I’m fine,” Regulus said.

“You’re injured?” Harry asked worriedly.

“I’m fine,” Regulus repeated. “Really. Just tired.”

“Let’s go upstairs,” James said quietly. “I’ll take care of him,” he said to Harry. “Promise.”

Regulus wanted to object, though he wasn’t sure why. He didn’t want to appear weak in front of everyone, and he thought that leaning against his stupid, hot *boyfriend* probably wasn’t helping, especially in front of that man’s son. In the end, he didn’t say much of anything, he just let James half carry him up to his bedroom.

The moment his bedroom door was closed, he slumped like all his strings had been cut. He really was exhausted, none of the sleep he’d gotten in the cellar had done much to help him, and his body was clearly fighting to get him to rest. James caught him easily.

“Tell me where you’re injured,” James said quickly, his voice husky.

“I’m fine,” Regulus said for a third time.

James huffed in annoyance but he didn’t ask again. Instead, he just began pulling Regulus’s clothes off.

“Hey!” Regulus objected weakly.

“These clothes reek,” James complained.

“I was sleeping in a cellar,” Regulus responded.

“What happened to your arm?” James gasped once he’d managed to wrangle Regulus’s shirt off of his body.

“I don’t know what he did,” Regulus said, reaching out to hide his damaged forearm with his other hand. James knocked his hand out of the way without even sparing it a glance. He dropped to his knees to get a better look at the damage, his hands already working to unbutton his trousers, dragging them off his hips in a way that would be sexy under other circumstances.

“This looks really bad,” James said unhappily.

“Thanks ever so,” Regulus muttered. He really didn’t want to be inspected anymore.

“I’ll have to research how to heal it.”

“I haven’t asked—”

“You don’t have to,” James interrupted smoothly. He looked up to meet Regulus’s eyes, earnestness and kindness on his face. “I want you to shower before you sleep.”

“You’re bossy,” Regulus complained.

“You’re one to talk.” James stood and began manhandling Regulus into the bathroom.

“You’ve never been bossy before,” Regulus said.

“Maybe it’s the lycanthropy,” James said thoughtfully, then paused. “Do you want me to stop?”

Regulus let out a tired sigh. “No, I like it,” he said sleepily. Another moment that would have been sexy under other circumstances. They were so *domestic* now, he thought. He wondered if they’d be *boring* soon.

James helped him wash his hair once they were in the shower, and when Regulus could barely keep his eyes open, he cast a few drying charms on him and tucked him into bed. Regulus didn’t fall asleep until he felt James climb in next to him.

For a while, he slept without dreaming. When he woke briefly he noticed that it was still night outside and James was snoring softly beside him. When he fell back asleep, he fell instantly into a dream. He was walking the isles of the Room of Hidden Things, an endless sea of lost objects surrounding him on either side. Next to him was Pandora. He hadn’t thought about her in a long while, but he wondered if she would be upset with him because of what happened to her daughter.

“You’ll have to forgive my husband,” she told him. “He was only afraid for Luna’s life.”

“I don’t blame him,” Regulus said, though he wasn’t sure if that was true. He did feel angry with the man, but perhaps anger and forgiveness were two sides of the same coin.

“He loves her a lot,” Pandora said. “He has since before she was born. He said she came to him in a dream months before she was conceived, said that she’d always planned to be our daughter.”

“And you believed him?” Regulus asked.

Pandora laughed quietly. “I did and I do. Xeno is many things, but a liar is not one of them. He’s a good man, and he never once judged me for my extracurriculars.”

“By extracurriculars do you mean the things that got you killed?”

Pandora nodded sadly. “I regret that I died in front of Luna, she didn’t deserve to see such a thing, but my research was important.”

“What exactly were you researching?”

Pandora smiled at him. “Cursed objects used to track missing people,” she said. “I had a friend who went missing, you see, and I was quite determined to find his body.”

Regulus swallowed. “You looked for me?”

“For many years. I never liked the way we left things.”

“I don’t remember how we left things,” Regulus confessed.

“You weren’t in your right mind those days, always messed up or too sad to notice much of anything. You showed me your mark, demanded that I never speak to you again. You were very mean about it,” she chided.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus said honestly.

“I know,” Pandora said. “I always knew you would be, you just never got the chance. We were always running out of time then, weren’t we?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Pandora was quiet for a while, the objects surrounding them seemed to be repeating like they were walking on a moving pathway, staying in the same space and always shifting at the same time. “You’re not running out of time anymore,” Pandora said.

“Aren’t I?” Regulus asked sardonically.

Pandora shook her head. “No, you’re not,” she said. “I hope you remember that. You have time now. You have to use it.”

He woke with a gasp, sweat drenching his sheets as they clung to his naked body.

“Wha—What?” James shouted, gasping along with him. “What happened?”

Regulus’s heart was pounding though it hadn’t felt like a nightmare. “Nothing,” he whispered. “Nothing, I’m sorry. Just an odd dream.”

“Okay,” James hummed, dropping back down to the mattress, halfway through a snore before Regulus could take a breath.

He tried to go back to sleep, but sleep never claimed him again. After a while, he got out of bed and headed down to the kitchen to get a cup of tea. It must have been very early in the morning, the sun wasn’t up yet, but he found Narcissa sitting at the kitchen table, Sirius sitting across from her.

“What are you doing up?” Regulus asked, not even sure which one he was talking to. Both of them looked up at him in surprise.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Sirius replied snottily.

“Sirius,” Narcissa chastised. “I couldn’t sleep. Sirius heard me moving around and came down to join me.”

“Oh,” Regulus mumbled.

“Would you care for some tea?” she said, gesturing toward the excessively expensive tea set in front of her. He had no idea where she’d found such a thing, certainly not inside Grimmauld Place.

“Sure,” he said, taking a seat. “Did you bring that from Malfoy Manor?”

Narcissa’s lips twisted bitterly for just a second before her face returned to its neutral expression. “No, Regulus, I believe that everything in my home has long since been destroyed.”

“Destroyed? How?” Regulus gasped.

“James didn’t tell you?” Sirius asked quietly.

“No,” Regulus said, “we didn’t do much talking.”

Sirius cringed in disgust. “Gross, don’t say things like that.”

“Merlin, Sirius, I was too injured to stand properly. All we did was sleep.”

“Well, good. I don’t want to be under the same roof while you two—” he cut off just so he could make a weird motion with several of his fingers.

“Sirius, please,” Narcissa urged. “Have some decorum.”

“That has never once worked on him,” Regulus said regretfully.

“I know,” Narcissa sighed.

“What did you mean about your home being destroyed?” Regulus asked, trying to be as sensitive as possible, though he couldn’t fight his curiosity. Narcissa presented a hand to Sirius to indicate that he should explain.

“Apparently,” Sirius said, sounding far too pleased given what had just happened to Narcissa’s house, “Remus and James had to use *Fiendfyre* to get into the manor’s wards.”

“*Fiendfyre*? Which of them even knew how to cast that?”

“Remus had apparently read about it. He had no idea how to contain it, not that it mattered much, but it dissolved the wards that were protecting a secret passage.”

“I didn’t know that *Fiendfyre* could dissolve wards,” Regulus said uneasily. How far would the cursed fire spread when it was left unmitigated?

“It cannot usually,” Narcissa said softly. “Only if it is cast directly at a ward, but as it burns continuously, it won’t be able to burn through the rest of the wards.”

“That’s good,” Regulus said, breathing out a sigh of relief. “Though I’m sorry about the manor. I supposed it’s all—”

“It was already coming through the walls when we left,” Narcissa said sadly. “It will all be gone if I ever return. My entire life, in ruins.”

Regulus noticed Sirius roll his eyes, but he chose to ignore him, grabbing the hand Narcissa had left resting on the table and squeezing it lightly. “I’m so sorry.”

“I suppose you think we deserve it for letting that madman into our home, for letting Bella —”

“Deserve has nothing to do with it,” Regulus said. He out of everyone had no business telling people what they did and did not deserve. He wouldn’t blame his cousin for mourning the home she loved. After a moment, when Narcissa steeled herself, Sirius spoke.

“She tried to kill the snake,” Sirius said, his words surprisingly kind.

“I figured, given the bite,” Regulus said, though he wasn’t trying to be dismissive.

“That’s not all,” Sirius said, a smirk spreading across his face. “After she was bitten, she dropped the fang, and guess who picked it up?”

“Who?” Regulus asked, almost worried to hear the answer.

“Lucius Malfoy.”

That did surprise Regulus a bit. “What did he do with it?”

“He’s not a monster,” Narcissa interrupted to say. “He loves his son and when I explained to him that we had to—that the snake had to die, he agreed to help.”

“He just let you go first, did he?” Sirius asked snidely.

“I planned to go first,” Narcissa said. “For Draco.”

Regulus felt something warm inside him, a hollow piece of himself that had felt empty for a very, very long time. “That was very brave.”

“It was stupid is what it was,” Narcissa dismissed. “Nagini lives and worst still, the Dark Lord saw us do it.”

“He would have killed you either way,” Regulus said. “He’s on the warpath, anyone in his way is going to lose their life. You must have realized that.”

Narcissa turned away from them slightly. “I only wanted what was best for my family,” she said.

Regulus could see anger sparking on Sirius’s face, but he didn’t share his feelings. He knew how hard it was to turn away from everything he knew, and in some ways, Narcissa had paid worse than he had. He’d only lost himself, not a great loss if you asked him, but Narcissa had lost the only place that had meant safety since the first time she’d gone there. At least she still had Lucius and Draco.

“He’s not going to let us get close to the snake again,” Sirius mumbled. Regulus hadn’t noticed the burning anger from a moment ago dissipate, but he was glad that it did. Not that he begrudged Sirius his feelings, but he wasn’t sure that he had the energy to deal with it just now.

“I don’t know,” Regulus said. “He won’t go anywhere without it now.”

“Her,” Narcissa said.

“Sorry?” Regulus asked.

“The snake is a her, Nagini is her name.”

“Huh,” Sirius said thoughtfully.

“I wouldn’t have expected it—her to have a name,” Regulus admitted. “I thought she’d just be... I don’t know, Tom the second or something.”

“You thought he would name his snake after himself?” Sirius asked.

Regulus shrugged. “Everyone in our family names their kids after other people, you have our father’s first name as your middle name. So do James and Harry. It seemed fitting.”

“Perhaps her middle name is Tom.”

“Nagini Tom Riddle,” Regulus said, causing a small laugh to leave Sirius.

“How will you kill her?” Narcissa asked, unamused.

“There are other ways,” Regulus said, his thoughts drifting back to the sword upstairs in his room. “We just have to find her again.”

The sound of someone descending the stairs distracted them, it was a soft crack against each old wooden step. The door to the kitchen opened slowly, Hermione peeking around the door quietly.

“Oh, you’re all awake,” Hermione said.

“Sorry, we couldn’t sleep,” Sirius said. His voice was different when he spoke to her, more like Remus’s was when he had to deal with one of the kids. He sounded almost like a professor.

“I wanted to—” her eyes landed on Regulus. “There was something I wanted to show you.”

“Okay,” Regulus said, standing instantly. He wasn’t sure if she meant in private or not, but he didn’t want to make her ask if that’s what she needed from him. He followed her down the hallway and into the library. She was wearing a thick robe over her pajamas and wondered if she was cold. The house was colder than usual, though Regulus wasn’t sure why. It was like the walls themselves were neglecting them.

“What is it?” he asked. She held out a Galleon to him. For a moment, he just looked at it curiously. When he reached out to take it, he realized it was warm to the touch and he turned it over to see two words etched onto it.

“I don’t know if James told you how they decided to use the *Fiendfyre*,” Hermione said. “It was Ron. He sent the message through the Galleon, I think he was trying to help.”

“And this message is from him too?”

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“How did you know to trust the *Fiendfyre* suggestion?” Regulus asked.

Hermione looked embarrassed like she was hoping he wouldn’t have asked that. He wondered how many others she’d told about Ron’s messages and how many of them hadn’t bothered to follow up.

“He told me something.”

“Something about?” Regulus prompted.

“About Draco,” Hermione said. “I don’t know if you know, and I promise I won’t say anything. Somehow I think he saw it, and I’ve read about it before, in the library at Hogwarts, though there wasn’t much information out there. They’re very secretive, so I

didn't mention that I knew to Draco. I don't think Harry knows, but honestly, it's so obvious once you know."

"Okay, okay, please slow down," Regulus said. "What exactly did Ron tell you?"

Hermione looked around conspiratorially as if Draco would have snuck into the otherwise empty room while they were speaking. "Draco is part Veela," she whispered.

"Oh, right," Regulus said, a little dumbfounded. He looked back down at the charmed Galleon, finally taking in what the words were. *The Diadem*. "Right," he said again. "Listen, Hermione, I think it's a good idea to keep what Ron told you to yourself. Draco needs to figure out what all of this means for himself before too many people find out." Hermione was already nodding before he finished his sentence. "Will you excuse me? I need to go talk to Sirius."

He didn't wait for Hermione to reply, he rushed from the library and hurried down the hallway back to where Sirius and Narcissa were speaking in low, stilted voices.

"Sirius," he said, Sirius's head snapped up the moment he heard his name. "We have to get to Hogwarts."

the hierophant part II.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“He’s going back to Hogwarts. I’m not sure if he’s going now or just eventually, but he has to check the Room of Hidden Things. I’m going to meet him there,” Harry overheard Regulus saying.

“Wait, what?” Sirius asked with a gasp. His voice sounded sharp and confused. Harry had been planning to talk to him, he’d had a nightmare the moment he’d tried to sleep and he’d been lying in bed for hours hoping he’d get back to sleep.

“Tom. I have to kill the snake and I’m positive she’ll be with him. He doesn’t know what I’ve found yet, he’s going to have to return to Hogwarts if he wants to check the diadem.”

“Sorry, which diadem are you referring to?” Narcissa asked. Harry was already moving away from the door though so he didn’t hear whatever answer Regulus was about to give. He climbed the stairs on his toes, careful not to make any noise, and rushed back into his bedroom.

He’d been thinking about the object that was tucked inside the Snitch Dumbledore left for him for weeks now. He’d discovered it the night Draco had stopped talking to him and he’d had a plethora of free time afterward to ponder what the object might be. He hadn’t had any idea at first, but as he searched every memory he had of Dumbledore, it finally occurred to him.

In Dumbledore’s office, there were several collections of odd, magical items that Harry had never been able to make sense of: a half-broken mirror with hair growing out of the side of it, a cup that looked like it was filled with cement that would randomly make bubbling noises, a birdcage that whistled songs if he got too close to it. He wished more than once that he could go through each of them and ask why the headmaster of a school would need to keep such odd objects in his office. He never got the chance, of course, but as he wondered about them, he found himself remembering one specific object that had caught his eye.

It looked like a solar system toy built right out of the wall, several circular, wooden objects tied to ends of strings, cords, and iron staffs, each of them moving in a small field of motion like the tentacles of a jellyfish floating endlessly in the sea. It was one of the few objects that Dumbledore had elaborated on, though he was far too cryptic with his words for Harry to understand what he was saying.

“It was a gift to Headmaster Dippet,” Dumbledore told him, “given to him by one of his students the year before he was made Headmaster. Of course, I doubt he saw it as a gift at the time. It was meant to be a Transfiguration project, but the student, I believe his name was Kasper, was never very good at Transfiguration. Just between you and me, he likely cheated his way into the higher-level course. During one of their final exam period, Kasper intended

to turn a piece of kelp into a flute. He must have gotten confused, I'm not sure he knew what a flute was, but what resulted was this object."

"Oh," Harry had replied, unsure of what to make of it. "Why did he keep it if it was just a mistake?"

"It was sticky," Dumbledore said matter-of-factly.

"Sorry?"

"It stuck to anyone that tried to touch it, and magic could have no affect on it. Dippet thought it was going to end poorly for all the students who'd managed to get themselves stuck to the object until he was able to attach it to a wall. The Hogwarts castle is a very special place, it has a way of healing things that seem like they'll never be healed."

"So it released all of them?" Harry asked.

"It did, indeed," Dumbledore responded. "They tried to destroy it after that, but Hogwarts had grown quite fond of it, as sentient beings are wont to do with gifts. Eventually, Dippet had it moved up to his office to keep students from running into it. It's lived here ever since."

He was such a weird man, Harry thought distantly as he grabbed the small object. It was identical to the ones on Kasper's Transfiguration accident. It couldn't have been a coincidence. Why else would Dumbledore leave it for him if it wasn't tied to something he'd already said? Though why Dumbledore wanted Harry to have it at all was a mystery. The only thing that made sense to him was that Dumbledore wanted to leave him something more important, that he'd left the object just so Harry would go back to his office to seek it out.

With a resigned look around the room, Harry tucked the object into his pocket. Next, he snuck down the hallway and into Regulus's room. He could still faintly hear his voice coming from the kitchen, so he knew he hadn't come back yet. He peaked through the door to see that James was still snoring soundly, unaffected by Harry's intrusion.

Still, Harry knew he'd have to be quick. He found the invisibility cloak near the end of the bed, James must have left it there when they'd come back from Malfoy Manor, and he found his wand on the bedside table. He'd let Regulus use it during the battle, but he would need it where he was going.

He spared James one final glance. He would see him again when everything was over. At least, Harry hoped he would.

Harry left the room without another thought and started down the stairs, silencing them under his feet so that he wouldn't alert anyone else to his plan. He knew Kreacher would tell Regulus the moment he was gone, but hopefully, he would have enough time to apparate away before that happened.

Right as he reached for the front door, a hand shot out from inside the library and dragged him inside. He nearly cried out before a small hand clamped over his mouth.

“What?” he mumbled, the word barely audible.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Hermione hissed. Harry stared her down, waiting for her to remove her hand. It took longer than expected for her to do so. She dropped her hand and lifted one eyebrow. “Well?”

“I’m going back to Hogwarts,” Harry said. He briefly considered trying to lie, but he didn’t feel like it was worth it.

“You can’t,” Hermione said.

“I have to. I can’t sit on the sidelines anymore, and Regulus is going back to fight.”

“Everyone is looking for you,” Hermione said.

“I know,” Harry replied. “But I’ll be careful.” He held up his invisibility cloak. “And I have this.”

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip. He wondered if she would try and call for Regulus. Would he try to stop him? Would he help him? Harry wasn’t sure. Finally, she seemed to make a decision. “I’m going with you.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “You need me.”

“Neither of you is going anywhere,” Draco said suddenly making them both jump violently.

“Draco, how?”

“I could feel you moving around. You are not walking back into danger. I won’t let you.”

Harry’s lip twisted into a sneer. “You can’t stop me,” he replied. “Besides, not all of us want to sit around like a bunch of cowards.”

“Coward?” Draco hissed, stepping forward menacingly. “Was I a coward when I followed you idiots to Lovegood’s house? Was I a coward when I led your,” he poked Harry hard in the chest, “father into my own home just so he could destroy it?”

Harry wanted to spit something vitriolic back, he wanted to rave and fight with the stupid git. He wasn’t sure why, he knew logically that Draco had already done a lot to prove himself, but he couldn’t seem to control his emotions. And he kept thinking about Draco’s stupid parents, the ones who’d allowed Draco to fall into the hands of Voldemort. Only Hermione’s intervention was able to stop him from saying something horrible, he was sure he would have lost control without her.

“Stop fighting,” Hermione urged. “You’re going to get us caught.” She glared at both of them. “Can you both just kiss and make up? Because if we’re going to go, then we need to go now.” Harry and Draco both took two steps away from each other, shoved in opposite directions by Hermione’s accusatory glare.

“We haven’t been—”

“We don’t—”

Both of them tried to speak at the same time, they looked at each other in unison.

“You were going to deny it?” Draco asked, his voice sounded surprisingly hurt.

Harry threw his hands up. “So were you!”

“Yeah, but you have no reason to be embarrassed,” Draco said, only a hint of smugness sparking in his eyes.

“You’re such an asshole,” Harry groaned.

“Right then,” Hermione said. She was far more smug than Draco was, which honestly was just annoying at this point. “Are we going to Hogwarts or not?”

When they left the library, the kitchen was empty, the door was propped open so it was easy to see. Harry thought that Draco was going to argue with him some more to try and keep him there, but after Hermione’s statement, and the revelation that she’d known, or at least suspected, that they’d been sneaking around together for a while now, Draco seemed too shocked to try and stop him. The only thing he demanded was that he be brought along and Harry couldn’t think of a reason not to include him.

Anything to get Draco away from his terrible parents was a good thing in Harry’s book. He hated that they were in the same house as him, especially Lucius, but he knew it would just lead to a fight if he said anything about it now.

If they lived, and if he and Draco were still... talking after everything was done, they could figure it out then.

Hermione grabbed a few things from her bedroom before they left, but Draco was already dressed and ready like he’d been prepared to leave from the moment he woke up that morning. They double-checked that no one was watching them, and then they stepped outside the front door, closing it snugly behind them.

“Who wants to apparate us?” Harry asked.

“I can—”

“I’m going to do it,” Draco said. He’d done the same thing when they’d gone to the Lovegoods’s home. He didn’t even know where they were going, but he refused to let anyone else apparate besides himself. Harry wondered vaguely if Draco had issues with side-along apparition. He could empathize with that, it made him feel a bit nauseous. Though he could admit that it wasn’t so bad when Draco was the one apparating him. “Where are we going?”

“Oh,” Harry said when he realized they were both looking at him. “I guess we can’t apparate straight to the school.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Hogsmeade maybe? They’ll probably

have closed most of the secret passageways, but they might not know about the one under Honeydukes.”

Hermione shrugged. “Sounds good to me,” she said.

“Okay,” Draco agreed. Harry threw the invisibility cloak over all three of them right as Draco grabbed onto him and Hermione. His grip felt firm and impossibly tight, the feel of it so grounding that it sent a shiver up his spine. He hoped neither Draco or Hermione noticed, but he wasn’t sure he was that lucky.

They landed in the center of Hogsmeade right as the sun was cresting over the horizon. For a moment, it was peaceful silence, an emptiness that reminded Harry of easier times, but then a loud screech filled the air, and all three of them dropped into a crouch. It sounded like someone was being murdered, and after a second it cut off and started again.

The doors to the Three Broomsticks burst open and at least a dozen people in hooded cloaks came barreling out, all their wands drawn. Harry reached out to seize Draco’s wrist as he lifted his wand, it wouldn’t do to give themselves away yet.

“*Accio Cloak!*” one of the wizards yelled. The cloak stayed put, as it was meant to, the summoning charm didn’t work on the object, but that didn’t mean they were safe yet. The Death Eaters were spreading out around them rapidly and soon they’d be surrounded.

“Let’s just leave!” Hermione whispered. “Disapparate now!”

They tried it, each of them in turn, but they couldn’t go anywhere.

“They were ready for us,” Harry whispered.

“What about dementors?” one of the Death Eaters said suddenly, his voice was close enough to make Harry jump. “Let ‘em have free rein, they’d find him quick enough!”

“The Dark Lord wants Potter dead by no hand but his—”

“Let’s move,” Draco hissed right as dread began to fill Harry’s chest. Harry followed him as Draco led them down one street and then another.

“Where are we going?” Hermione asked.

“I think there’s someone who might not turn Harry in,” Draco said, though he sounded a bit uncertain. Harry hoped he was right. They narrowly missed two Death Eaters who were running close together between two houses, they sounded young and he dreaded to think of who they might be.

“*The Hog’s Head?*” Hermione whispered.

Draco didn’t answer, he approached the front door and knocked twice just below the door handle. It was the crack of dawn, Harry highly doubted that the gruff old man who ran the bar was going to be awake, but after a few moments, the sound of feet hitting the wood inside was heard and the door was swinging open.

“Who’s there?” he asked in his deep, gravelly voice.

Harry stared up at the man, his grey hair looked even whiter this early in the morning. Draco elbowed Harry in the side.

“Right,” Harry whispered. “It’s Harry Potter.”

Shock overtook the man’s angry expression. He swung the door open wider and stepped aside.

“What are you doing out here?” one of the Death Eaters yelled. Harry barely heard the man’s harsh reply as he, Draco, and Hermione scrambled into The Hog’s Head. They didn’t take the invisibility cloak off until the door was firmly locked.

He turned on them in a second. “You bloody fools. What were you thinking, coming here?”

“Thank you,” Harry gasped. “We can’t thank you enough. You saved our lives.”

The man didn’t seem to appreciate Harry’s thanks, he glared at them unyieldingly.

“You’re Aberforth,” Hermione said. “Dumbledore’s brother.”

“Dumbledore has a brother?” Harry asked.

“Everyone knows that,” Draco said.

“I didn’t know that,” Harry replied, shaking his head. “Is that why you brought us here?”

“Yeah,” Draco said like Harry was the dumb one. “Obviously. He’s probably part of the Order,”

“You’re here on Order business?” Aberforth asked after a long eye roll.

“Yes,” Harry said, inclined to get out of the conversation with Draco, and not really caring that he had less to do with the Order than most of the people he knew. “We need to get to Hogwarts.”

This seemed to only make Aberforth angrier. “What you’ve got to do,” Aberforth said, leaning closer to them, “is to get as far from here as you can.” Harry wasn’t all that interested in hearing from another adult who felt like they knew what was best for him. He wasn’t running from this, and he didn’t appreciate that people kept trying to stop him.

“You don’t understand. There isn’t much time. We’ve got to get into the castle. Dumbledore—I mean, your brother—wanted me—”

“My brother wanted a lot of things,” Aberforth said, the grimy lenses of glasses looked momentarily opaque, making him look inhuman for a moment, “and people had a habit of getting hurt while he was carrying out his grand plans. You get away from this school, Potter, and out of the country if you can. Forget my brother and his clever schemes. He’s gone where none of this can hurt him, and you don’t owe him anything.”

Harry growled in frustration. "I don't care!" he said loudly, both Draco and Hermione hushed him looking nervously at the front door. "I do not care what you thought about your brother. It doesn't have anything to do with me. I'm not doing this *for* him, I'm doing this for Regulus, and Sirius, and everyone else. You're right, Dumbledore is dead, I don't care about him. So are you going to help me or not?"

Aberforth stared at him, dumbstruck, for a moment, blinking like he couldn't believe anyone had ever spoken to him like that. In his defense, it had probably been a very long time since someone had had the gall.

He slowly walked away from them, heading up the stairs in the back of the bar. Harry shared a look with both Hermione and Draco before he went to follow him. Once at the top of the stairs, Harry spotted a painting of a young girl looking down at all of them with a small smile.

"You know what to do," he said to her. Her smile widened almost imperceptibly, then she turned and walked away, straight toward the back of the painting. Harry had never seen a person in a painting walk that way, they usually moved side to side, and it struck him as unusual.

"What?" Harry asked quietly.

"There's only one way in now," Aberforth responded without looking at them. "You must know they've got all the old secret passageways covered at both ends, dementors all around the boundary walls, and regular patrols inside the school from what my sources tell me. The place has never been so heavily guarded. How you expect to do anything once you get inside it, with Snape in charge and the Carrows as his deputies... well, that's your lookout, isn't it?"

When he was done saying his piece, Aberforth began his trek back down the stairs, leaving the three of them alone.

"I think—I think that was Ariana Dumbledore," Hermione whispered.

"How do you know that?"

"I read about it in Rita's book," Hermione said.

"How did you manage to get a copy of Rita's book?" Draco asked.

"Sirius got it for me," Hermione said.

"What?" Harry asked.

"When did he do that?" Draco asked, sounding oddly offended.

Hermione shrugged. "When he left the manor that one time. I asked if he would grab it if he had the chance and he brought it back."

"He was going out risking his life and you asked him to pick up a book for you?" Draco asked.

“Yeah,” Hermione said with a nod. Harry almost didn’t know what to say. He looked back at the painting, he’d never known that Dumbledore had a sister. As he peered at the empty space Ariana left, he started to see the dark shadow of movement. After only a moment, he saw Ariana skipping back, but it looked like there was someone right behind her.

“Who is that?” Harry asked worriedly.

Draco and Hermione were still bickering but both of them stopped when they noticed the same shape. “Did she go and grab another painting?” Hermione asked.

“Maybe,” Draco said quietly.

As she approached the frame of the painting, her gentle smile came back into view. She looked at them each in turn right before stepping aside. Her movement shifted the painting and it began to swing forward like a door on a hinge. From behind it came a head of red hair so recognizable that it brought tears to his eyes.

“Ron!” Harry shouted. His grin was just as Harry remembered it. He and Hermione jumped forward at the same moment, enclosing their friend in a hug instantly. He laughed, deep and boisterous as he hugged them back.

“I knew you three were coming,” Ron said.

“I’m so happy to see you,” Harry said cheerfully.

It was a sweet reunion, so nice that Harry almost missed the small bit of awkwardness between Ron and Hermione. He barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes at the two of them. Once he’d greeted the two of them, Ron gave an embarrassed smile to Draco.

“Hey,” he said, “glad to see you’re alive.”

Draco’s lip twisted into a mean sneer but Harry jumped in before he could say something unforgivable.

“How did you get here?” Harry asked.

“Oh, it’s brilliant,” Ron said. “You’re going to love this!”

Ron led them through the passageway back to Hogwarts as he filled them in on what had been going on at the school. Things were far worse than Harry could have imagined. Snape’s control had led the school to be nearly unrecognizable from the place it had been when he first went there as an eleven-year-old.

“Do Death Eaters really teach here?” Draco asked. He was walking at the back of the group, but Harry could feel his presence right behind him and he found it comforting to have him there. He was relieved to hear him speak. Ron didn’t miss a beat when answering him.

“They do more than teach,” Ron said with a shake of his head. He looked taller than Harry remembered, he had to bend forward to walk through the passage. “They’re in charge of punishment as well.”

“The Carrows are?” Draco asked, sounding horrified. Harry didn't know much about them, but it was clear that Draco was no stranger to the Death Eaters.

“Yeah,” Ron said with a nod. “Amycus teaches Dark Arts—they got rid of the Defense part—and we’re supposed to practice the *Cruciatus Curse* on people who get detention.

“What?” Hermione gasped.

“It’s awful,” Ron said. “And they hurt you if you refuse to do it. Neville, he’s got this gnarly cut on his face right now because he wouldn’t torture some first-year. Even Crabbe and Goyle don’t like it, though I’ll admit they’ve gotten more vicious since Luna left school.”

“I forgot about that,” Draco said faintly. Harry thought he might have been the only one to hear it.

“Alecko, she’s Amycus’s sister, teaches Muggle Studies. It’s basically just a way for them to tell us how horrible Muggles are.” He shrugged like he was remembering something particularly terrible. “They won’t hurt most of us purebloods too badly,” he said, like that was supposed to calm them. “It’s the people whose family members are giving the Death Eaters trouble outside of school that are really in danger. That’s why Luna didn’t come back.”

“We know,” Harry said grimly. “We rescued her from Malfoy Manor.”

“That’s right,” Ron said faintly like he was already aware. “I’m glad you’re here now. Mum doesn’t want me or Ginny coming back after Easter, she says it’s too dangerous, and I don’t know who else is going to lead Dumbledore’s Army with us gone.”

“Neville isn’t helping?” Hermione asked curiously.

Ron laughed loudly. “Neville is... well, you’ll see.” They turned a corner in the passage and then climbed a short flight of steps that led to the backside of a painting. Ron pushed it open and immediately they were flooded with noise.

“Look who it is! Didn’t I tell you?” someone yelled. Harry emerged into the room, the screams doubled in volume. “HARRY!” “It’s Potter, it’s POTTER!” “*Hermione!*”

The screams only dwindled when Draco finally left the passage and everyone in the room caught sight of him. Harry was prepared to defend him, though he wasn’t sure why, but Draco seemed unbothered.

“Oh, please, not all at once,” Draco drawled. No one seemed to know what to make of him, but Harry, unfortunately, or fortunately, he wasn’t sure which, laughed, and that seemed to break the tension.

“Where are we?” Harry asked once he’d been greeted by almost every person in the room. It was filled with hammocks of nearly every color and beds tucked everywhere they could see. There were students from all four houses, though only a handful of Slytherins were among the group.

“Room of Requirement,” Ron said. “Neville found it. The Carrows were chasing him, and he needed a place to hide and the castle made this. After a few days, he got hungry and since the castle can’t just make food out of nothing, it created the pathway to the Hog’s Head. We were only lucky that Aberforth was so willing to help us out.”

“I’m surprised,” Harry grumbled. “He seemed less than thrilled to help us.”

“He’s kind of an old bastard, but he’s not so bad once you get to know him.”

Everyone in the room seemed very interested in what Harry had been up to, there had been rumors about Death Eater deaths and traps being laid for Snatchers.

“It wasn’t me,” Harry said, trying not to show his embarrassment. “It was Regulus.”

“Of course!” Lavender said. “That’s exactly what I said.”

“He’s been doing everything,” Harry said, his excitement growing at the mention of someone he cared about so deeply. For a moment, he’d forgotten that he wasn’t all alone, that he wasn’t trying to do this by himself. “He even rescued all of us from Malfoy Manor. He fought Voldemort all by himself. It was insane.”

“That’s so cool,” Parvati breathed.

Harry seemed to pull them all in, dragging the attention away from himself. He was surprised by how much he enjoyed it. He’d spent his whole life with people watching him, waiting to see what he would do next, all because of something that happened to him when he was a baby or because of things he was forced to do like the Triwizard Tournament. For once, it felt nice to fall into the background in someone else’s story.

Ariana’s painting opening interrupted him midway through one of his stories. Luna and Dean stepped out of the passageway, both wearing wide grins.

“We got your message, Ron!” Luna said. A roar of delight went through the crowd, loudest of all from Seamus who ran forward and jumped into Dean’s arms. “Hi, everyone!” Luna said happily. “Oh, it’s great to be back!”

“Luna?” Harry said. “What are you doing here? How did you—”

“I sent for her,” Ron said, holding up his Galleon. “We made a few more once you three left, they’re wicked useful.”

“But why—”

“You three coming back means it’s time to overthrow Snape and the Carrows.”

“Of course, that’s what it means,” Luna said brightly. “Isn’t it, Harry? We’re going to fight them out of Hogwarts?”

“Listen,” Harry said, his panic jumping. “I just—”

“Yes,” Draco said over him. “That’s exactly what you’re going to do.” The room fell silent. “Well? Do you want them out of here or not?”

“Wait, wait,” Harry said quickly. He grabbed Draco by the arm and dragged him away from the others. “What are you thinking? They could all get hurt, they could get killed!”

“The chaos can only help us,” Draco said. “We need a distraction if we’re going to get into the headmaster’s office.”

“How did you know—”

“Please, I’m not an idiot,” Draco said with an eye roll. “And anyway, do you want to leave them all here waiting for the next horrible thing the Carrows could do to them?”

“Do you know the Carrows well?” Harry asked distractedly. A flash of anger went through him imagining Death Eaters hurting Draco.

A visible shiver went through Draco’s body, but he looked smug when he said, “Try to stay focused here, Harry. Are you going to help them or not?” He gestured toward the rest of the room.

“Yeah,” Harry breathed. “I guess I am.”

The plan came together almost accidentally. Draco was right, they needed a distraction. The others knew that Regulus would likely be in the castle eventually, so they were to look out for him and let him know what was going on if they spotted him. Meanwhile, Harry was going to head with Draco to the headmaster’s office. Everyone else had to focus on drawing the Death Eaters, Snape, and the other professors away from where they needed to go.

Hermione decided to stay with Ron which didn’t phase Harry at all. They’d both missed him but he would be stupid to miss what was happening between them. Besides, it was easier to move under the invisibility cloak with only two people.

And, embarrassingly, he didn’t have to hide the way he and Draco kept pressing up against each other every time they turned a corner. Nothing *happened* exactly, but Harry had to admit it was nice to be alone with Draco after so long without him. It felt like the space between them was insurmountable only a few days ago, but now he couldn’t imagine anyone else by his side.

It was far easier getting to the headmaster’s office than Harry thought it would be. This early in the morning there was almost no one in the halls and they only had to avoid a few people on the way. While this quiet, it was almost hard to believe that Hogwarts had twisted so much. It seemed so normal when it was just the two of them.

They approached the entrance to the office at a soft run but came up short when Harry realized that he had no idea what the password was.

“What are you stopping for?” Draco asked.

“I don't know what Snape changed the password to. Dumbledore was always choosing candies.” While he was talking, the gargoyle jumped to the side as if he'd said exactly what he was supposed to.

“Oh, well, that was easy,” Draco said, already dragging Harry up the stairs.

The office was thankfully empty, though Harry had a feeling it would be. It was different than it had been when Dumbledore was here, all of the odd objects, all the books, and every piece of decor was stripped from the wall. Only the paintings remained, though most of them were empty and the few old headmasters that remained were sleeping.

Attached to the wall was the piece Harry was thinking of, though it was covered by a large black rug. He wondered if Snape had been unable to remove it and had opted to cover it so that no one would know what was there. Harry pulled the rug out and instantly spotted the missing piece. He remembered the story Dumbledore had told him, about the gift that wasn't a gift, and he wondered what this piece would lead to.

“Attach it,” Draco urged, excitement obvious in his tone.

Harry laughed softly then dug the piece out from his trouser pocket. The moment it was revealed to the room it flew from the palm of his hand right to its place on the piece attached to the wall. For a moment nothing happened, and Harry was filled with such potent disappointment that he thought he would never recover, then a click sounded.

“What was that?” Draco asked.

“I don't know.”

They both turned, heading in opposite directions to inspect the room. Draco was the one to discover it. “Oh, here!” he called. He was bent over the side of the desk peering at something near the floor. Harry rounded the desk to find a small drawer opened right above where the desk ended.

“What's in it?”

“A box,” Draco said, carefully grabbing the long black box and dropping it onto the desktop.

“What do you think is inside?” Harry whispered, almost afraid to answer it.

Draco shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

Harry reached out to open it with a shaking hand. He hoped it wasn't something cursed, that this wasn't all some trick perfectly laid for them. Inside, he found a wand. Dumbledore's wand.

“Oh,” Harry said, almost a bit disappointed.

“Is that his wand?” Draco asked.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I think so. It looks like his." He picked it up, feeling a small spark of magic go through his fingertips, like getting shocked when trying to turn off a light switch. "Why would he leave this for me?"

"And in such an inconvenient place," Draco muttered. Harry dropped the wand back on the table, unsure of what to do now. Movement caught his eye and distracted him. In the corner of the room, tucked behind two small windows, was the shining light of reflective water.

"What is that?" Draco asked, lifting his head from where he was inspecting the box the wand was hiding in.

"It's a pensieve," Harry said.

"A what?" Draco asked.

"It's used to look at memories," Harry said. He crossed the room quickly to look at it. "It looks like there's a memory in there now."

Draco joined Harry next to the object and glanced inside. Swirling in the water were wisps that looked like pieces of fabric that were being dissolved. Every now and then Harry caught sight of a familiar face peaking out of the liquid.

"It's a memory of Regulus," Harry said. He pressed on the glass and was relieved when it opened, the pensieve floating out of the space and into the center of the room.

"How do we look into it?" Draco asked

"You just lower your head into it," Harry said. He took a deep breath and dropped his face into the water. The sensation was bizarre, one moment he was standing still, and the next he was falling forward into the memory. He was back in Dumbledore's office, Dumbledore sitting behind his desk, still decorated with all his trinkets and odd objects.

"What do you know about prophecies?" Dumbledore said. Harry turned around to see Regulus sitting across from him.

"Not much beyond what I learned in Divination," Regulus said, then added, "So nothing. Why?"

"As you know, Voldemort and his Death Eaters successfully lured Harry to the Department of Mysteries only a few months ago. Do you know why?"

"No," Regulus said.

"There is a prophecy, one made about Harry Potter and Tom Riddle. Voldemort was after it, he had been sending Death Eaters for months trying to steal it with no success. You see, only people of whom a prophecy is about can retrieve that prophecy."

Regulus nodded. "That's why they needed Harry."

“Exactly. They lured Harry there hoping to trick or force him into taking the prophecy and giving it to one of them. However, they failed. The prophecy was destroyed during the battle.”

“Why did the Dark Lord want it so badly?”

“He believed that it contained vital information regarding Harry, about how he had survived the Killing curse and how he might be destroyed.”

Regulus’s mouth dropped open for a second before he clicked it closed. “Why didn’t we try to get it then? We could have had Harry grab it at any time?”

“Because,” Dumbledore said, “I already know what the prophecy said. There was no need to retrieve it.”

Regulus looked stricken. “Who else knows about this?”

“No one, not in full. Harry knows that there was a prophecy, and I intended to tell him at the end of last year what was contained within it, but given your death, he was not interested in speaking with me. Or anyone for that matter.”

“I see,” Regulus said softly. “But you didn’t tell Sirius? He’s Harry’s official guardian now.”

“I did not. I had a busy summer,” Dumbledore said, and without preamble raised his right hand. It was half dead, a black curse spreading out from the knuckles. “I did not have time to speak with Sirius, and before long, you had returned, and the time had passed.”

“And now you think I’m the person to tell. Why?” Regulus asked.

“You care for Harry and though Sirius officially adopted him, you have acted as his guardian and advocate since his first year at Hogwarts. I want to train Harry, but I am not a fool. He will do nothing without your say so.”

“What did the prophecy say?” Regulus asked.

“Do you mind if I show you?” Dumbledore gestured over toward his pensieve.

The memory swirled and shifted, it made Harry’s stomach turn uncomfortably. When it settled, he was staring at the face of Trelawney, though she was far younger than he’d ever seen her.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...”

Harry returned to Dumbledore’s office a second later, right as Regulus pulled his head out of the pensieve.

"You've known about this the whole time?" Regulus asked.

"It was the reason I sent James and Lily Potter into hiding. Frank and Alice Longbottom as well. We did not know which child it would be about until Voldemort attempted to kill Harry."

"How did the Dark Lord know about this?"

"One of his Death Eaters overheard it. Do you understand now why I wanted to teach Harry?"

"No," Regulus said breathlessly. "No, if Harry is responsible for this, then I will train him. My brother and I." He shook his head. "He's just a teenager, he's too young to... to kill anyone."

"Regulus—"

"No, you asked for my permission and you don't have it. He deserves to be a kid, even if just for a little bit longer. I won't — I won't subject him to this."

Harry was gasping for air when he came out of the pensieve. For a moment he felt like he was free falling as if he'd been knocked off his broom. Draco's hand on the back of his neck was the only thing that brought him back to his body.

"He wanted me to kill Voldemort. That's why he gave me the wand," Harry gasped.

"Regulus didn't want you to."

Harry shook his head, he didn't know what to think. He just needed a moment, but he didn't get one. The sound of the door clicking open distracted them. They only had a second to jump to their feet before two Death Eaters attacked.

"It's the Carrows," Draco shouted, though Harry could have guessed. They were both stout and odd-looking, with identical sets of cloudy eyes. They were obviously siblings. Harry pulled out his wand, prepared to defend against a spell, but the male sibling, Amicus, Harry thought his name was, caught sight of Dumbledore's wand.

He lunged for it right as Alecko tried to *crucio* Draco. Harry was torn between protecting him and grabbing the wand. His body made the decision for him. Amicus was distracted, at least momentarily, and Harry needed to take advantage of it. He jumped toward him, a stunning spell flying out of his wand before he could even consciously choose to cast it. It hit Amicus in his side, not quite center enough to fully knock him out. He looked up surprised and Harry hit him with another spell.

When Amicus crumbled to the ground, Harry rushed forward to snatch the wand off the desk. Draco's scream startled him so badly that he almost dropped it. He turned around to curse Alecko, an Unforgivable already on his tongue, but someone beat him to it.

"*Imperio.*" Alecko's eyes fell blank as Draco's screams stopped. Harry froze for just a second, just long enough to catch sight of McGonagall standing in the doorway, her wand extended.

Harry wanted to greet her, but he had to check on Draco first. He couldn't stop himself.

Draco was just starting to sit up when Harry knelt next to him, he was relieved that he seemed to be okay, though his hands were shaking just a bit.

"Are you okay?" Harry whispered.

"I'm fine," Draco said. Harry helped him stand. "Professor," Draco greeted.

"What are you two doing here?" McGonagall asked, though she was staring at Draco like she'd seen a ghost. Harry guessed that she had.

"We apologize for our intrusion," Draco said.

"We've come to take over Hogwarts," Harry said at the same time. Draco shot him a look which Harry ignored. "Voldemort is coming here. We have to get the Death Eaters out."

"I see," McGonagall breathed. She didn't ask any questions, not at first, but already, Harry could see a plan forming behind her wizened eyes.

Chapter End Notes

fun fact: in the book, the password to the headmaster's office is 'dumbledore.' jkr is a talentless hack so she never explains why this is the password or how Harry just happens to guess it on his first try, so I did my best to work around that point.

the judgement.

“He’s going back to Hogwarts. I’m not sure if he’s going now or just eventually, but he has to check the Room of Hidden Things. I’m going to meet him there,” Regulus announced. He’d intended to speak with Sirius alone, but he’d realized that he didn’t particularly care if Narcissa overheard him. He didn’t think she would go back to Tom Riddle’s side now, not after he had tried to kill Lucius, not now that they were both traitors.

“Wait, what?” Sirius asked with a gasp, his eyes widening. His fingers were resting on the table and they curled into fists the longer Regulus spoke.

“Tom. I have to kill the snake and I’m positive she’ll be with him. He doesn’t know what I’ve found yet, he’s going to have to return to Hogwarts if he wants to check the diadem.”

“Sorry, which diadem are you referring to?” Narcissa asked.

“Ravenclaw’s lost diadem, Tom Riddle turned it into a weapon of sorts, a way to keep himself alive, just as he did to Nagini. Sirius and I destroyed it years ago, but he doesn’t know that yet.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Sirius asked.

“Yes,” Regulus said assuredly. “I can’t wait for too long, now that he knows I know, it’s only a matter of time before he tries to make more. I have to strike while the iron is hot and take him out while it’s still possible.”

“Regulus, you could get killed,” Sirius whispered. He seemed truly distressed by the possibility, and Regulus wanted to empathize with the feeling, but they’d come so far, he couldn’t back down now. Especially given the way Harry’s mind was turning, if Regulus let things lie, he risked Harry forcing himself into the action and getting hurt in his stead.

“I know,” he said as sympathetically as he could manage. “But someone has to do it.”

Sirius stared him down. He could see Narcissa out of the corner of his eye, she was watching both of them with open curiosity, but he couldn’t look away from his brother. They’d been through terrible things together, both in this life and their previous ones, but did that make Sirius more or less likely to let him go without a fight?

“Give me a chance to tell Remus,” Sirius said finally. Regulus blew out a sigh of relief.

“I need to tell James anyway,” Regulus said.

“Is he still asleep?” Sirius asked.

“He was when I left.”

“So was Remus,” Sirius said, the side of his lip curling up in a smirk. “You’d think they’d been the ones tortured for two days.”

“I suppose it’s easier to sleep when your plans went off without a hitch,” Regulus said, but he was smirking too.

“What will you do?” Sirius asked, turning his question on Narcissa.

She startled slightly. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve left Voldemort’s side, you’re here, what will you do now? Especially if Regulus is leaving.”

“I hadn’t—” she said faintly.

“Sirius,” Regulus warned gently.

“What?” Sirius asked. “It’s a valid question. She and her husband agreed to help Voldemort of their own free will, both of them as adults, not only the first time but after he came back too. I think it’s fair for me to wonder what she’s going to do now that she has so much access to the two things Voldemort wants.”

“Two things?” Regulus asked.

“You and Harry,” Sirius said. Regulus hadn’t considered himself part of that equation, somehow, even after his direct confrontation with the man, he still struggled to think that Tom knew who he was and saw him as useful or a threat. It seemed ridiculous given how he’d been ignored when he’d first joined the Death Eaters.

“I suppose you’re right,” Regulus said, though he wasn’t completely sure.

“Well?” Sirius asked of Narcissa. She looked uncomfortable, but she visibly swallowed that feeling down like it was nothing and replaced it with that pureblood pride they all felt. She lifted her chin and narrowed her eyes dangerously.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to protect my family,” Narcissa said. She meant Draco, she’d always do what she had to to protect Draco. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean her plans aligned with theirs. If it were in Draco’s interest to turn everyone in this house into the Death Eaters, she would do it without blinking an eye.

Sirius looked furious, but it was Regulus who spoke, much to his own shock. “You think that makes you noble, doing anything to protect your son, but it just makes you another coward like the rest of them,” Regulus said.

Narcissa flinched almost imperceptibly. “Perhaps,” she conceded. “But I would be a coward that’s alive. You understood that once.”

The words hurt worse than he expected. “Maybe I did,” Regulus said, “but it never did me any good, and I’ll tell you this. The way you’ve acted hasn’t done a single thing to help your son. *I’m* the reason he wasn’t marked, *I’m* the reason he didn’t become a murderer at sixteen,

I'm the reason he had somewhere safe to live for the last year. That was me, not you, and not a single choice I made for him came from cowardice."

Narcissa seemed dumbstruck, blinking distractedly up at him, but Regulus wasn't done.

"You will do what you think is right, and so will I," Regulus said. "I'm not going to force you to make either choice or try and lock you up here so you can't hurt anyone. I'm done shouldering the load for what you should be doing."

He didn't wait to hear her reply, though he thought he heard Sirius let out a low whistle as he left the room, climbing the stairs as quickly as he could. He suddenly felt very cold and he wanted nothing more than to climb back into bed with James. He was relieved to see that he was still sleeping soundly when he reentered the room, but when Regulus knelt on the bed, James's eyes slid open.

"Where'd you go?" James asked softly.

"I needed to talk to Sirius," Regulus said. James reached for him and Regulus let himself be pulled in, curling into James's broad chest the moment his body hit the bed. He never felt safer than he did with James, he wouldn't have ever expected to find such safety given everything happening in the world, but James was like a safe harbor all on his own. Regulus breathed in the scent of his skin, pressing his nose into James's shoulder and letting himself relax for a moment.

For a while, he thought James was asleep. So much so that his words startled him. "What were you talking to Sirius about?" James asked, then lowering his voice he added. "Was he okay?"

"He'll be fine," Regulus said, because he didn't know how Sirius was feeling at the moment, he'd been through something horrible, they both had, but he was sure that Remus would piece him back together, and with time, Sirius would spring back to the man he was before. He always did, even after the unthinkable.

James sighed quietly then pressed his lips to the side of Regulus's head. "I was worried about you both," James said. "I don't think I felt real for a single moment since we said goodbye. I don't want to do it again."

Regulus's eyes burned. "I missed you too." He tried to snuggle closer and was disappointed to find they were already pressed as close together as they could be without taking their clothes off. He would consider it if he had the time, and if Sirius hadn't just said the thing about them not doing that while under the same roof. Not that he was planning to obey Sirius, he just knew he would think about that at the wrong moment and it would ruin the entire thing.

"I love you," James said, squeezing Regulus a little tighter.

"I love you too," Regulus replied. "I have to go back to Hogwarts."

James blew out a slow breath. "I figured," James said.

"You did?" Regulus pulled back to look at him, James's face was soft and a little forlorn.

"It all comes back to Hogwarts, for us and for him. He went to so much trouble to secure it from Dumbledore and he hid one of his Horcruxes there. It makes sense."

"You're not upset?"

"Why would I be upset?"

"Because I was just tortured for two days and now I'm about to leave again."

James's arms tightened to the point of pain. "What happened to you in there?"

Regulus sighed. "I'm sure you can guess. It wasn't pleasant and I'll...there will be side effects, but I'm alive. You saved me."

James didn't seem comforted by his statement. Regulus knew it would be a long road before James felt okay about what happened, he could see it in his eyes. The anguish was almost worse for him. It would have been worse for Regulus. Dealing with the pain was nothing compared to imagining the same happening to James. He would burn the world down before he would let that happen to James. Even the thought of it enraged him. Though he supposed, now that he thought about it, that was exactly what James had done for him.

Regulus kissed him roughly, their lips colliding with enough force that James's head was pushed backward. He recovered quickly, kissing Regulus back with enough desire that they wouldn't be leaving the bed for a while if Regulus didn't stop them.

"I don't have much time," Regulus breathed, pulling away. James pressed his forehead to Regulus's.

"Just let me shower and we can go," James said.

Regulus almost laughed. "You're coming with me?"

James blinked one eye like he was trying to get a better look at Regulus. "That was a question?"

Regulus really did laugh then. "I guess not," he said.

James smiled, but only briefly. When his smile fell, he said, "We need to treat your arm."

"I'm not sure what we can—"

"Kreacher!" James called a bit too loudly. Kreacher apparated into the room. "Will you wrap Regulus's arm up? He's been injured."

"Yes, James," Kreacher said while Regulus gasped. He never imagined Kreacher saying James's *name*. The sound of it was so ridiculous it left him speechless. James kissed him once on the mouth and climbed out of bed, strutting toward the shower like the bossy arsehole he was.

Narcissa was gone when they came downstairs. Regulus was ready to go, he didn't want to waste any time. He was feeling antsy and his arm ached from where Kreacher had been messing with it. He'd cast a few elvish healing charms on it before wrapping it up, but everything he did just seemed to agitate the wound. He would have to go to a real healer about it eventually, but he worried about what would happen when they saw it was a Dark Mark. He'd lived so long without people knowing about it that it bothered him that someone else would have to find out.

The living room, kitchen, and library were all empty, and Regulus was almost inclined to just leave. Sirius knew where he was going and who knew how long he would take? But after only a few minutes Remus descended the stairs dressed in a thick black sweater and muggle denim.

"Are you leaving?" Remus asked gently as he approached them. They were standing near the front door, Regulus too anxious to wait anywhere else. When Remus came close to them, he reached out seemingly without meaning to and squeezed James's shoulder. James leaned into it like he couldn't help himself. He'd never seen them be physical with each other, but he wondered if it had something to do with their shared lycanthropy.

"Yeah," Regulus said, "we're going now."

"You should probably let Harry know, he'll be disappointed if you go without saying goodbye."

"Oh, right," Regulus said. He'd been so focused on getting where he needed to go that he forgot people would be looking for him. "I'll tell him. Where is Sirius?"

"He's still upstairs." Remus looked mildly uncomfortable. "We're going to meet you both there. I have something I need to do first."

"You don't have to come at all," Regulus said, "either of you. I don't want to put anyone else in danger. I'm fine if you sit this out."

Remus shook his head wearing a soft smile. "Neither of us wants that."

Regulus waited for a moment, half expecting Remus to flip at the last second and take the out Regulus was giving him, but it didn't seem to be coming so he gave him a quick goodbye and climbed the stairs to talk to Harry.

He knocked twice on the door. It was still early in the morning so Harry might not be up yet. He waited for only a minute or so before he silently turned the knob.

"Harry?" he called gently. He didn't want to startle him. When no answer came, he opened the door a little wider. "Harry?" he asked again.

The room was empty. The bed looked a little ruffled but when Regulus went to touch it, he found it completely cold. Harry hadn't been in here in a *while*. "Kreacher," he called. Kreacher apparated next to him. "Where is Harry?"

Kreacher looked guilty. That wasn't a good sign. "Harry Potter left."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" Regulus asked trying to contain his anger. Kreacher looked torn but ultimately decided to answer.

"Miss Luna Lovegood asked Kreacher not to," Kreacher said shamefully.

"Luna asked you—Is Luna gone too?" Regulus asked incredulously. Kreacher nodded. "Hermione?" A nod. "Dean?" A nod. "*Draco*?" Another nod. Regulus almost couldn't believe it. "And you kept this all a secret because *Luna Lovegood* asked you to." Kreacher nodded one final time. Regulus sighed. "Why did you listen to Luna?"

"Kreacher likes Miss Luna Lovegood."

"I should have guessed," Regulus muttered. "Are they at Hogwarts?"

Kreacher nodded.

"Bugger," Regulus mumbled. "Do we have any spare wands?"

Kreacher apparated them into the Forbidden Forest. They didn't have the invisibility cloak with them because Harry had stolen it when he left Grimmauld, but they still had the Marauder's Map which at least was something. The castle was swarming with Death Eaters and names Regulus had never seen before. It wasn't going to bode well for any of them, he thought, but they had no choice now. Especially when they landed right outside of the Hogwarts boundary and checked the map to see Harry and Draco traversing the corridors, heading Merlin knew where.

"Are we not going in through the Shrieking Shack?" James asked.

"No," Regulus said, then pointed to the map, "see how many people are guarding the Whomping Willow. We'll never get through undetected."

"Well, then how are we going to get in? I doubt we can just walk through the wards."

Regulus let out a quiet sigh. "You're not going to like it," he said quietly. "But try to be nice."

"Be nice to who?" James asked, his voice already fading out as he spotted the figure walking toward them. Regulus had been careful not to mention this part of the plan, but since the night he found the Gryffindor Sword, he'd been thinking about who led him there. He'd told James who it probably was, but he was pretty sure that James had either on accident or on purpose forgotten about that entire conversation. Regulus almost regretted that he would be reminded of it now.

"How?" Severus Snape's voice spoke volumes to the amount of horror and distress that he felt laying eyes on James Potter for the first time in two decades. Sirius would have found it hilarious, Regulus knew that for certain.

“Severus,” Regulus greeted. Snape’s dark eyes turned on him, they were filled with hate, not that that was much of a surprise, but it was different than the last time Regulus had seen him.

“*How?*” he asked again, this time through gritted teeth.

“It’s a long story,” Regulus said. Snape’s eyes blazed with violence. Regulus wasn’t afraid though, he’d never been afraid of Snape.

“He killed Dumbledore and you called him to help us?” James whispered incredulously.

“Yes,” Regulus said, not interested in explaining his choices any further. “I know he did, but he gave us the sword that Dumbledore left for me, so I’m choosing to trust him.”

“Let me kill him,” Snape said. For a split second, Regulus thought the words had come from James. It was the result he expected.

“No,” Regulus said with an exasperated sigh. “You are not allowed to kill him.”

“He’s the reason—” Snape’s words cut off but his mouth continued to move.

“James!” Regulus chastised.

“He was about to talk about Lily,” James said. Regulus ground his teeth together.

“I don’t care,” Regulus said harshly. James and Snape shared an offended look. “Lily is not important right now. You two can work out your issues on the topic another time.” He added a glare toward James. “Without me,” he added harshly.

James had the good graces to look ashamed, not that it improved Regulus’s mood. Regulus turned back to look at Snape.

“Are you going to help us get into Hogwarts?” he asked. Snape didn’t move to answer and after a beat, Regulus understood why. “James, will you please lift the spell?”

“Fine,” James muttered.

“I’m not helping him get into the castle,” Snape said, pointing at James.

Regulus groaned. “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t come back from the dead,” he complained. “I promise I’ll keep James away from you, okay? I need to get in there. My—James’s son is currently breaking in and I need to stop him.”

That seemed to only make Snape angrier, but thankfully, he finally gave in.

“Disillusion yourselves,” Snape instructed. He turned, his cloak swishing around him dramatically, and James let out a displeased noise.

“How are you friends with this man?”

“I don’t want to hear anything from you right now,” Regulus replied tightly, still a little stung by the Lily thing. James didn’t say anything back and Regulus was grateful for it, he could use a little silence to plan their next points of action.

Snape led them through the forest toward the edge of Hogwarts’s wards. They were so thick that they could be seen with the naked eye. Regulus didn’t think he’d ever see anything like it before. They looked almost green, like a shield built from the worst kinds of magic. He had no idea how they were going to get through without Snape’s help. He approached the ward before them and pulled out his wand, pressing it into the thick shield and murmuring quietly. After a second, he held up his other hand and gestured for them to walk forward. Regulus crossed through the ward first, only a little nervous that it wouldn’t work, and breathed out a sigh of relief when both he and James had made it safely through.

“There are only a few passageways into the castle that aren’t being guarded,” Snape said, eyeing them carefully. “None of which you know about,” he added for James’s benefit. James’s face was carefully blank, but Regulus noticed one of his eyes twitch slightly when Snape smirked.

The sun was starting to rise, so they had to stick close to the tree line while heading up toward the castle. Regulus could see dementors floating near each of the entrances and high up near the student dorms like they thought students might fly out the windows and they intended to kill them.

They walked up toward the Quidditch Pitch then moved up the hill and crossed the field used for flying class. It was completely empty, lucky for them given that even with the Disillusionment Charms they’d likely be spotted if someone was out there. He only hoped that it was too early for anyone to be looking out the windows at them. However, it was depressing to see a place of joy and excitement lying bare. It seemed like it hadn’t been used in a long time.

They approached the door to Madam Hooch’s office, the only office door that faced the outside of the castle. Only a moment before reaching the door, Snape took a hard left and walked fourteen paces down the side of the wall. He seemed to be counting his steps, so Regulus counted his as well.

Snape lifted his wand and delicately placed it against the stones. They instantly began to shift like the bricks that guarded Diagon Alley, revealing a tiny passageway. The ceiling was low enough that they all had to crouch, but within a few minutes, they were inside the castle.

They stepped out into a dimly lit corridor, Regulus thought it might have been the one that led from the library to the dungeon but he couldn’t be sure. It wasn’t one that was well used, he’d only been here a few times and almost always from his first life. A soft clicking noise could be heard echoing down the hallway and after a second, Regulus realized it was footsteps. Likely the same moment that Snape realized the same thing because he glanced over at them and gestured toward the wall.

Regulus took the direction instantly and pulled James backward so that they could stand in an area that wouldn’t be noticed. If they didn’t move too much, the Disillusionment Charm

should stay in place. Snape moved toward the other side of the corridor and slid behind a large suit of armor.

James let out a gasp when he saw who was coming around the corner. It was McGonagall looking far older than the last time Regulus had seen her. This year had clearly taken its toll. He couldn't even imagine how James must have felt. She appeared to be alone, but there was something to the way she was walking that made Regulus feel like that wasn't true. He wasn't sure why.

McGonagall's face was pulled into an expression of determination, but she slowed slightly when she came upon where Regulus and James were standing. He thought they would be caught—though being found by McGonagall was hardly the worst thing that could happen to them—but when she raised her wand, she was pointing it in the opposite direction.

“Who's there?” she asked.

“It is I,” Snape said, stepping out from behind the suit of armor. He looked like the cold-blooded Death Eater he pretended to be. Regulus hadn't realized how different his face looked when he was in private. “Where are the Carrows?” he asked.

Regulus didn't understand what was going on.

“Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus,” McGonagall said.

The two of them continued to speak, a volley delivered back and forth so rapidly that Regulus struggled to find it. The Carrows had informed Snape of an intruder, McGonagall was pretending not to know what was going on. A muscle in Snape's cheek twitched, the only chink in his armor.

“Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have, I must insist—”

McGonagall moved swiftly, her wand slashing through the air faster than Regulus had ever seen. Snape was just as adept, blocking the spell with a shield. The spells seemed to fly without stopping after that, Regulus and James dropped into a crouch to avoid them.

“Minerva!” a voice echoed. Regulus turned to see Flitwick, Sprout, and Slughorn at the other end of the corridor. “No!” he shouted, aiming his wand at the suit of armor where Snape had retreated slightly. “You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts!”

He enchanted the suit of armor which sprung to life with a clatter. Snape jumped out from behind it and hit it with a spell that sent it flying toward Flitwick and the others. It only barely missed Regulus's head. Snape didn't wait for them to retaliate, he took flight in a swirl of magic Regulus had only seen one other wizard use, and hurtled through a classroom door at the end of the corridor, destroying it in the process. Distantly, Regulus could hear McGonagall's voice crying after him, “Coward! *COWARD!*”

Regulus was about to drag James in the opposite direction, all of the professors were in that classroom now and it was the perfect time to escape, but then he heard a very familiar voice floating out the damaged door.

“You mean he’s *dead*?” Harry asked. Regulus sprinted into the room without waiting to see how James reacted. He came around the corner just as his disillusionment charm fell.

“*You*,” he growled. Harry spun around like a little kid who’d just been caught sticking his hand in the cookie jar. He looked guilty and defiant, the worst mixture Regulus could imagine. Draco was standing right near Harry. He just looked guilty, carefully avoiding Regulus’s eyes.

“Regulus!” Harry said. He sounded mildly surprised, but not as surprised as Regulus thought he should be.

“You promise me you wouldn’t leave without telling me,” Regulus said harshly, pulling out his wand. Harry jumped.

“I had to come back—”

“Did you stop for even a second to think what—”

“Regulus, please,” Harry said, looking uneasily at the professors. Most of them were staring at Draco in shock, McGonagall was the only one that seemed unfazed.

“I have done *everything* trying to keep you safe,” Regulus growled.

“We already talked about this,” Harry urged.

“I did not *agree* to anything,” Regulus said. He ran forward like he was going to grab Harry by the arm and forcefully drag him from the school. Harry jumped backward out of reach, leading to a truly humiliating chase that lasted all of ten seconds.

“I heard the prophecy,” Harry yelled, still staying out of reach.

“What prophecy?” Regulus yelled back, still too enraged.

“I’m supposed to kill him,” Harry said, throwing himself behind Draco was looked both annoyed and bemused.

Regulus was thrown for a second. “What?” he breathed.

“I’m supposed to kill Voldemort. Dumbledore left me this to do it,” Harry said, holding up Dumbledore’s wand over Draco’s shoulder, his eyes poking out from the other side.

“Oh,” James gasped like something had just occurred to him. The sounds of shock that went through the room were disturbingly loud, in Regulus’s opinion. He’d forgotten that no one knew about James, that the last time he’d come to Hogwarts he’d been under a heavy glamour. All of the professors looked like they’d just been hit with a stunning spell staring at him. James looked a bit chagrin like he hadn’t meant to reveal himself.

“James?” McGonagall asked softly. “James Potter?”

“Erm, yes, well,” James said awkwardly.

“But... you’re... how?”

James shrugged, shooting an apologetic look toward Regulus. “It’s quite a long story,” he settled on finally. That seemed to be their catchphrase recently.

“Is Lily—” McGonagall asked in a choked-out voice. Regulus believed he should have been given an award for self-control when he did not roll his eyes. Merlin, how much did he have to do—

“No,” James said. “It’s only me.”

“And Mr. Malfoy,” Slughorn interjected. James looked momentarily confused.

“Oh! Right! Yes, Draco is very much alive. As you can see.” He gestured toward a humiliated-looking Draco.

“I see,” McGonagall said then seemed to finally get a grip on herself. “I believe we have a job to do,” she said to the other professors. “We must barricade the school. Go to your houses and collect every student. We will need to evacuate everyone.”

Regulus could tell he was behind, but it changed nothing beyond his basic plan. Tom was still coming here, Regulus was still going to kill Nagini. Everything else was just happenstance.

“Harry,” Regulus said when Harry tried to scoot past him unnoticed.

“I’m going to help gather the rest of the students,” Harry said.

“Come back here. Now,” Regulus said darkly. Harry’s shoulders dropped and though Regulus noticed Slughorn giving him an uneasy look, Harry didn’t look afraid. When he was right in front of him, Regulus reached out and grabbed him by the shoulders like he’d make a run for it if Regulus didn’t hold him in place. “You are not killing Tom Riddle.”

“Dumbledore—”

“Fuck Dumbledore,” Regulus said sharply. Harry’s eyebrows jumped up his forehead. “It’s a terrible thing to kill someone. Please, do not do this. Let me handle it.”

“What if you can’t?” Harry asked and Regulus didn’t think he was trying to offend him, but Regulus was offended regardless. “I just mean,” Harry went on quickly, “that what if the prophecy means only *I* can kill him. What if you try and because of the prophecy, you fail and die? I don’t want that to happen.”

Regulus sighed. No matter what he said, Harry was never going to feel completely comfortable with staying out of things, especially now that he’d heard the prophecy. Where he’d heard that wretched thing, Regulus had no idea. Nothing had worked so far, he realized. Everything he’d done to keep Harry safe so far was only going to be temporary. Regulus was sure he could kill Tom Riddle. He just had to get a little lucky. But that wasn’t a good enough argument to settle Harry’s nerves.

“Just let me try first,” Regulus said. “Let me try.”

Harry looked unsure, he glanced down at the wand in his hand. "I don't know."

"Dumbledore was preparing for every outcome," Regulus said. "He never knew the future, he only planned for what *could* happen. He and I talked about the prophecy, I've known for a while what Dumbledore thought of my plan, but he wasn't right about everything."

Harry still looked unsure, but unfortunately, they were out of time.

"I think someone just put up additional wards around the school," James said. He was pointing at the window and Regulus turned to see new lights shining down over the school, blocking out all the dementors from reaching the castle.

"Let's go to the Great Hall and meet with the others," Regulus said. "Harry, if you want to help, you can help evacuate the students." Harry nodded, at least momentarily placated by that. "Draco," he called, Draco stepped around to his field of vision, "Please try to stay alive. I really don't want to fight with Narcissa if something happens to you."

Draco seemed mildly amused for just a second before his face fell. "Is she upset that I left?"

"I'm not sure she knew when James and I left," Regulus said. "But no, I—I doubt she'll be upset with you. She understands—" his eyes drifted to Harry unbidden, "She'll understand." Draco frowned slightly.

"Shall we go?" James asked.

Regulus waited for either Harry or Draco to object. When neither of them did, they all headed out into the corridor and toward the Great Hall. The area they were in was still oddly silent, but the closer they got to the Great Hall, the louder the hallways seemed. More and more voices were echoing off the expansive walls, filling Regulus's ears.

It felt like he was eleven all over again like he was heading to the Great Hall for the first time, preparing for his sorting, preparing to meet all the other students. Anticipation sat low in his stomach and his heart began to beat quickly.

James placed his hand in Regulus's as they got closer, James's palm against his dragging him back to the present. James's eyes were soft when Regulus glanced at him. They were all in terrible danger and for the last hour it had felt like he and James were out of sync with each other, but now here he was, still right at Regulus's side, walking with him like they were always meant to.

James glanced forward at where Harry and Draco were walking ahead of them, then turned back to Regulus and leaned in to kiss Regulus on the cheek. It was an apology and it was forgiveness, all wrapped into one little package. Regulus squeezed his hand in return.

Only a second later, they entered the Great Hall and were met with a wall of noise. The hall was filled to the brim with students, most of them still in their pajamas. All of them looked confused and frightened. Regulus couldn't imagine what these last few months had been like for them, how they'd managed to deal with the uncertainty, especially with some of their

classmates vanishing or never coming back from the summer holidays. It must have been terrifying.

The hall went momentarily silent when everyone spotted Harry, but once they did, the noise was deafening. Regulus was just glad he and James were not the center of attention at the moment. He skirted around most of the group, aiming to speak with Flitwick who was standing with a group of older Ravenclaws, but before he could make it, two people slammed into him.

Regulus thought he was under attack at first, but then he realized that he was being hugged.

“Regulus!” Lavender squealed. Regulus’s heart was in his throat. He dropped James’s hand to hug both of the girls back, both Lavender and Parvati holding him as tightly as they could. “We missed you!”

“We thought you were dead!” Parvati added excited.

Regulus laughed, his eyes stinging a bit though he didn't know why. “You thought I was *dead*?”

“You never came back to school,” Parvati said when she pulled back, “and there wasn’t any news. It wasn’t until Harry told us that you were the one attacking Death Eaters. You’ve had them running scared.”

“Wait, what? How do you know about that?”

“Because of Potterwatch!” Lavender said, then frowned. “Although, I suppose that name is a bit misleading now.”

“What’s Potterwatch?” James asked. Lavender did a double take.

“Who are you?” she asked. James and Regulus shared a look, Regulus wasn’t sure what answer to give. James decided for him.

“I’m James Potter. I’m Regulus’s boyfriend.”

“What?” Parvati screamed.

“Regulus, you have a *boyfriend*?”

“Oh god, why did you do this?” Regulus groaned as both girls nearly jumped on top of James.

“Did you say Potter? Are you related to Harry?” Lavender asked.

“Yeah!” James said. “I’m a distant cousin of his,” he lied easily. Regulus reached up to cover his eyes. He didn’t know how much longer that lie would hold.

“Regulus!” a voice shouted, it was a welcome distraction. He spun around just in time to catch sight of Ron’s smiling face.

“Ron!” he shouted back, only a bit surprised when Ron hugged him. He wasn’t sure they’d hugged in years, but he was oddly comforted by it. Hermione was right behind him looking a little ashamed.

“I’m sorry—” she started to say. Regulus waved her off.

“It’s fine,” he said quickly. They were all here now, it seemed too late to dwell on his anger. “Are you Luna and Dean with you?”

Hermione nodded. “They’re helping prepare things. Or Dean is. Luna is down in the dungeon.”

“In the dungeon?” Regulus asked.

Hermione shrugged. “I have no idea,” she said.

“What’s the plan?” Regulus asked.

“They’re going to evacuate all the students that aren’t of age,” Ron said. He was sturdier than the last time Regulus had seen him. Whatever had been happening at Hogwarts, it had changed Ron, he seemed more serious, more direct in his words. Regulus could barely put words to it, but the distinct feeling of melancholy filled him. He’d been watching all of these kids grow up and now they were adults, still teenagers, still young, but they weren’t the little children he’d met all those years ago. And somehow, he’d missed this last jump and the thought made him sad.

Regulus looked around. He saw Dean and Seamus in a deep conversation, Seamus kept pointing toward where the Slytherin students stood. Regulus tried to track where he was pointing, but he couldn’t manage it. Ginny was with the other Gryffindors, a wide grin on her face despite a nasty bruise that covered half of her cheek.

He looked over at the Slytherins but he barely saw any of the kids he knew. The only two he recognized were Theo, who was glaring at the floor, and Pansy, who was in the middle of shaking Draco so hard that his head was flying back and forth on his shoulders. He couldn’t make out exactly what she was saying, they were pretty far from him, but he was sure he caught the words ‘I’m supposed to be your girlfriend’ coming out of her mouth.

He searched the crowd one more time. “Where is Neville?” he asked. Ron opened his mouth to answer but they were momentarily interrupted by a huge group of adults entering the Great Hall. Regulus spotted Tonks first, just moments before he saw both of Ron’s parents.

“It’s the Order,” Ron said happily. He stepped forward to greet them but paused just long enough to ask Regulus. “Do you have the map?”

Regulus nodded that he did.

“I haven’t seen Neville yet this morning. He might not know what’s going on,” Ron said. It wasn’t exactly a command, but Regulus could hear the request nonetheless. As Ron left him standing there, he realized how much Ron had changed. The confidence in his walk, the

instructions he was already doling out, the strategy spinning behind his eyes. He was a man now, so different from the boy Regulus had once known, and yet still the same.

“Let’s go find Neville.”

the judgement part II.

Chapter Notes

cw: character death

James wasn't upset that the professors saw him, he didn't mind that they knew he was alive again, he really didn't. But he also didn't want every other member of the Order of the Phoenix to catch sight of him in a Great Hall filled with Harry's friends and peers. It all seemed to be a bit too much.

He was also sure that if Lily was brought up one more time today, Regulus was going to break up with him just to be dramatic, and James was not interested in that happening.

Not that he blamed him, if every time people saw Regulus they brought up Barty or Alexander, James would lose his mind. He was far more jealous than Regulus was, though he liked to think he was good at hiding it. Maybe he wasn't... He did kill Barty after all. However in his defense, he was attacking Regulus, and he couldn't be held accountable for his actions when someone was hurting Regulus.

All this to say, he was grateful to slip around the crowds of people unnoticed before heading toward the dungeon. They'd spotted Neville on the map down in an unmarked office. They also noticed that Luna was somewhere in the Slytherin common room with Crabbe and Goyle, two of Draco's friends.

Regulus just shook his head with a fond smile.

"We'll catch up with her afterward," Regulus muttered before heading down the corridors to the dungeon. They were completely empty now that the entire student body was inside the Great Hall. It was almost eerie. James had barely spent any time down in the dungeon, but it somehow felt wrong.

They had to use the map to find the office Neville was in. Neither of them had ever gone so deep into the dungeon, not even Regulus during his time as a Slytherin. It was practically a labyrinth down there. The door to the office was half covered by a rug that looked like it had been burned more than a few times.

Regulus knocked on the door three times and then pushed on it. It swung open like it wasn't latched. What they were met with made James's head spin for a moment.

It looked like it had once been a storage room for potion ingredients or a very old office for a not-very-important professor. The room was circular, every inch of the wall covered in soot and unknown liquids that had dried into crusts. There were shelves built straight out of the

wall, magically attached to all the stones, and covered in unlabeled bottles of varying ages. Some were so old that they had decades of spiderwebs covering them.

In the center of the room was a brewing table made for professional potion brewing. Behind it was Neville Longbottom wearing all white like a muggle mad scientist and bent over the table so he could inspect two groups of seemingly identical herbs. He didn't look up when they entered, too enthralled with what he was doing.

Regulus cleared his throat before calling, "Neville," in a low voice. Neville's head lifted slowly, his eyes still glued to the table as if he didn't want to lose count yet. When he dragged his eyes up finally, James had to hold in a gasp. He had a long cut down the side of his cheek starting right under his eye and going halfway down his neck. He was wearing brewing goggles, expensive ones, but behind them, James could see that one of his eyes was damaged, potentially blinded. He had a small streak of white hair right above the damaged eye.

Neville's mouth stretched into a grin. "Regulus," he said, sounding relieved. "You're back."

Regulus only paused for a second, but James didn't miss his hesitation. "Yes," he said. "I am. Everyone is—Tom Riddle—Sorry."

Neville's face softened. "You're wondering what happened to me," Neville said. Regulus frowned.

"I knew Hogwarts wouldn't be safe, but—"

"The cut was Amycus," Neville said, gesturing to his cheek, "but the eye was my fault." He took off the goggles with one hand, dropping them to the table with a soft clatter. "A potion's accident right before Christmas. Nan was furious but what's done is done."

"I'm so sorry," Regulus said. He sounded genuinely distressed as he said it like he thought he could have stopped it had he been around, as if he wouldn't have been in even worse danger staying at the school and trying to protect every single student in the castle.

"It's okay," Neville replied and he sounded like he meant it. He had a kind face, even with the injuries, much like his parents, and James felt himself comforted by the sight of him. "What did you say was happening? Something about Tom Riddle?"

"The professors are barricading the school, they believe Voldemort is going to attack," James explained. "Everyone is gathering in the Great Hall. I think they're going to evacuate most of the students."

Neville frowned. "Evacuate them how? Through Hogsmeade?"

James and Regulus shared a look. "I didn't think to ask," James said honestly.

Neville's frown deepened. "Sorry," Neville said, "not to be rude, but who are you? You look a bit like Harry."

James opened his mouth to tell Neville the same lie he'd told Lavender and Parvati. It wasn't good practice to lie to teenagers, but he felt that trying to explain exactly who he was and

how he'd come to be alive was a bit too complicated. Regulus, it seemed, didn't share the same limitation.

"He's Harry's father," he said simply.

Neville looked like he'd been struck. "I'm sorry?"

"It's a very odd story, and I'm happy to tell it to you one day. I feel like you deserve to know. But for now, all you need to know is that Hogwarts is under attack and Ron told us to come get you."

Neville blinked at him. His eyelids were the only part of his face that could move, every other muscle so still that he looked like he'd been frozen solid. James almost wanted to chastise Regulus, was this really the right thing given the circumstances? But then Neville shook himself like a dog who'd just finished swimming, and a new, grim, and serious expression took over his face.

"Where is Headmaster Snape?" he asked. James didn't know Neville very well, but from his limited knowledge of the boy, he was sure that was the last thing he expected to come out of his mouth.

James looked to Regulus. He wore a curious expression, yet he didn't look surprised.

"He left," Regulus said. "There was a confrontation between him and Professor McGonagall. Last we saw him, he was flying through a classroom window."

James watched Neville closely as he took in this information. He was certain that any other student in the castle would be overjoyed to hear the news. He'd overheard some of them speaking in the Great Hall; he knew what they thought of Snape and what he'd done to the school. Neville must have been the standout, he didn't seem happy, if anything he seemed far more upset than was necessary.

"Where did he go?" he asked.

Regulus shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't know," he said.

Neville made a small noise of distress. "I have to go after him."

"What?" Regulus asked incredulously, his first real sign of surprise. "No, Neville, you can't go after him. I'm sure he's—" He snapped his mouth shut.

"You're sure he's what?" Neville asked pointedly.

"I'm sure he's gone back to—Voldemort's side."

James had only heard Regulus call Tom Riddle Voldemort one other time and it was even more shocking to hear that name come out of his mouth now. He could tell from the pallor of his skin that he was uncomfortable saying it, but James felt himself fill with pride. If they weren't in the process of talking to a distressed teenager, James might have kissed him straight on the mouth.

“He doesn’t want to,” Neville said.

“Sorry?” Regulus asked.

Neville swallowed and clenched his teeth together like he was fortifying himself. “He’s been helping me this year. Slughorn is useless, but Snape’s been helping me develop my potions. He even found this old office for me. He’s not as bad as they say. I think—I think he has to do all that stuff.”

James could feel his mouth hanging open, though he couldn’t bring himself to close it. He’d never heard someone speak positively about Snape besides Lily. Even Regulus, who seemed to be allied with Snape if nothing else, barely spoke positively about him. If anything, Regulus was just using the man, and though James didn’t like it, he could at least respect it.

Regulus seemed at a loss for words, but Neville didn’t need him to reply.

“I don’t need you to believe me,” he said. “I’m going after him.”

“Neville,” Regulus breathed. “That is not a good idea. You could get killed.”

“I don’t care,” Neville said. “No one else cares about him, they all want him dead.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” James muttered, earning a very unhappy glare from Neville. James threw up his hands in surrender.

“I know it’s strange. I know he’s a—he’s not a nice person, but if no one else stood up for me when I was all alone, then I don’t know if I would be here.”

Regulus softened slightly, clearly that sentence meant more to him than it did to James.

“That’s not the same thing,” Regulus said. “Snape is an adult. His own choices brought him here, not anything else.”

“I don’t care,” Neville said. “I’m still going after him.”

During their time living in the tent, Regulus had talked at length about all the students he knew at Hogwarts. He’d explained what they were all like including every detail he could think of. There wasn’t much to do when it was just the two of them besides talk. Well, there was something else they could do, but even that required breaks if they both wanted to maintain the use of their legs. So when they weren’t in bed and they weren’t training, they would talk. Regulus had spoken about Neville many times, describing what he was like the first time they’d met, the way he was bullied unfairly by Snape, the way Regulus had all but threatened the man into being kinder to the poor boy, and most importantly, the way Neville had showed signs of true bravery, even as an eleven-year-old.

James could see that bravery now. It was the same look his son wore when he stood up for what he wanted, the same look Sirius had worn when he spoke about going against his family’s beliefs, the same look that every member of the Order of the Phoenix wore when they all agreed to fight.

Neville was very much his parents’ child, and he wasn’t going to go back.

“Where will you go?” James asked. Neville spoke like he had a plan, perhaps he knew something they didn’t.

Neville looked conflicted for only a second. “To the shack. If they’re going to barricade the school then there will only be a few ways out, not to mention there will only be a few places for Voldemort to wait.”

“The shack?” Regulus asked.

“The Shrieking Shack, it’s near Hogsmeade. I can go into the forest from there and find him.”

Regulus rubbed his tongue over his teeth, his eyes narrowed in thought. James hoped that he said no, that he stopped Neville from going out there with Voldemort and what would likely end up being a hoard of Death Eaters just to save the worst man James had ever met, but then Regulus looked at him and James knew he was going to fold. For all the times Sirius had described Regulus as cold and mean when they were in Hogwarts, for all the murders Regulus had committed since coming back to life, he was still remarkably soft. He couldn’t say no when someone wanted something.

James sighed, resigned to his fate, and said, “We’ll go with you.”

Regulus gave him a grateful look, his gentle eyes lighting up with love, before they both turned to look at Neville who was watching the two of them with open curiosity.

“I haven’t asked—”

“You don’t need to,” Regulus said. “We’re going with you and that’s the end of things.”

Neville took a moment to accept their words before nodding. They left the small, old office together, spilling out into the hauntingly quiet corridor.

“So where have you been all this time?” Neville asked. “I figured you were with Harry. Everyone was looking for him so I knew he wouldn’t be coming back. They think he killed Dumbledore.”

Snape killed Dumbledore, James wanted to snap. He valiantly held his tongue.

“I’ve been trying to kill Tom Riddle,” Regulus said matter-of-factly. “Harry wasn’t with me, but you’re right, he wasn’t going to come back for seventh year with the state of things. He needed to be somewhere safe.”

“Why are they saying he killed Dumbledore?” Neville asked in a way that made it clear he knew it wasn’t true.

Regulus shook his head angrily. “They want to make it seem legal, they want to seem reasonable while they trap a teenager and deliver him right to a man who is going to kill him. It’s all manipulation, all to keep people believing that nothing has changed, that they can all go on as normal without trying to fix anything.”

“That’s horrible,” Neville said, gasping it out as if he hadn’t felt firsthand what it was like to experience the manipulation and punishment of the new regime.

“It is,” Regulus said with a slight nod. “But I intend to stop it.”

Neville smiled gently. “I believe you.”

As they moved through the labyrinth in the dungeon, they slowly got closer to the rest of the school, and the noises of other students started to filter down the corridors. For a while, it just sounded like regular chatter, but then the sharp noise of spells being cast hit their ears and James knew that things weren’t right, that they’d been gone too long.

“What is that?” Neville asked, all of them trailing to a stop.

“It’s started,” Regulus said.

Neville clenched his teeth. “I’m still going. I understand if you two don’t want to.”

James was already planning to tell him they would still help him. Regulus wasn’t the type to agree and then let things go. But then he noticed the look on Regulus’s face.

“What is it?” James asked.

“Luna,” Regulus said. “I think she was still in the Slytherin Common Room. We have to warn her. And Harry—Harry is with everyone, if he thinks he has a chance—”

James reached out and tangled his fingers together with Regulus’s, squeezing them softly. He’d planned to stay with him until the last minute, that was the idea from the jump. After what happened at Malfoy Manor, he wasn’t sure he could handle being separated from Regulus again. But now they had this kid stuck on walking straight into danger to rescue his favorite professor all while an entire group of students that Regulus knew and cared about were going into battle.

“I’ll go with Neville,” he said. “I know that pathway the best.”

Regulus’s face fell making James’s heart clench painfully. *Fuck*, he didn’t want to leave him. He really, *really* didn’t, but there were no other options.

“I love you,” Regulus said in response. James kissed him, Neville’s curious eyes be damned.

“I love you too. Come back to me, okay?” James said.

“I have so far, haven’t I?” Regulus asked with a sideways smile.

It was all the goodbye they got. Another string of sharp yelling and the smell of something burning sparked them into action. They had to get moving, they were out of time. He kissed Regulus one more time and then he and Neville took off up the stairs toward the Great Hall.

“Come on,” James said. “I know the fastest way to the Whomping Willow.”

“How do you know about the secret passageway?” Neville shouted breathlessly.

James barked a laugh. “Oh, kid, you have no idea.”

As they sprinted past the Great Hall, James peered out through the doors that led outside. They were both stuck open, and James could just barely see the huge shield that blocked the school was still intact. Voldemort and his Death Eaters hadn’t made it through it, though James thought it might only be a matter of time. The fighting seemed to be coming from Death Eaters all dressed in similar attire—not the traditional dark wizard robes he’d seen the Death Eaters wear at Malfoy Manor, but a more professional version like they were on a job.

Of course, he thought. There had been Death Eaters and Ministry employees swarming inside the Hogwarts grounds. They’d still be inside now even with the new shields.

They made their way toward the Grand Staircase, jumping out of the way right as a rogue spell came flying at them. It looked like it was a modified *Incarcerous*, James could see the sight of shackles poking through the spell, no doubt meant to latch onto the first person caught by the magic. They ducked out of the way as a young woman tried to stun them. She had a ruthless snarl on her face, an intention to chase them as far as she could. Even in the chaos of the fighting around them, she’d clearly decided they should be her prime targets.

He wouldn’t realize why until later, but once he did, he wondered how many times they got lucky that the other Death Eaters did not spot Neville.

She chased them down the stairs, jumping at the last second as the staircase she was on began to move as if trying to give them a head start away from the woman. James blocked two of her spells, dragging Neville behind him, but it didn’t seem like it would be enough. He couldn’t protect himself and Neville and also take her down.

Luckily, right as they made it to the floor below, a freezing spell came flying from the stairs right above them and hit the woman right on the top of her head. She let out a startled *oof* sound as her body froze in place, crashing to the floor loudly. James peaked up above the stairs and caught sight of the broad grin of Nymphadora Tonks.

“Nice shot!” he shouted happily. He hadn’t seen her in so long, not since before Sirius and Remus were married. He didn’t have many friends in his second life, and he found that he missed one of the few people who made his life a little better.

“Thanks!” she said. “Glad to see you’re alive.”

James grinned. “For now, at least!” He said the words happily, but their dark tone weighed on both of them.

Her smile widened just a little further, her eyes twinkling, as she said, “For now! Good luck, James!”

James turned from her and nodded for Neville to keep following him. Neville was quiet, focused, as they ran, and it nearly put James on edge. He hadn’t known what to expect from

the guy, though he could admit that even if he did know, he wasn't sure it would have lined up with who he was now. After the year he'd had, he deserved to have changed a bit.

They slipped around only a handful of other Ministry employees on the way to the passage out of the castle. None of them looked like they were full Death Eaters, and James and Neville were able to avoid them for the most part, sliding behind hanging rugs and around corners.

There were dozens of ways out of the castle as James knew well. There were probably far more than that actually, but he'd only been able to find about forty of them during his time as a student, but he knew of one that led right to the top of the hill that overlooked the Whomping Willow. It was inconvenient to get to it from Gryffindor Tower, but perfect if he was anywhere near the dungeons or the Great Hall.

Like many of the secret passageways, it was hidden behind a painting of an inanimate object. Similar to the one in front of the kitchens that required tickling the pear, the one was of an old Grandfather Clock. It moved like it was a normal clock except much slower, ticking one second forward every couple of minutes or so. In order to get access to the passage, the clock had to be set to 7:17, a number that meant nothing to James but was clearly important to the original painter.

He used a delicate finger to spin the hands, taking his time so he wouldn't mess it up or go too far. When the clock struck 7:17, fireworks erupted in the reflection of the clock as if it was facing an open window and someone had set off fireworks just outside.

"Cool," Neville breathed when he saw it. James wholeheartedly agreed.

"I found it in my fifth year. One of the ghosts in Hogsmeade mentioned something about a clock and I'd seen this one a few times so I just started messing with it."

"Wow," Neville said. "I should have been doing stuff like that."

James laughed. "I'm sure you had more important things," he said.

"Yeah," Neville conceded a little wistfully.

The passageway led up through the walls of the castle out onto the perimeter. Because it had to go so far above ground from where the entrance was, a lot of the passage was made up of very steep stairs and several ladders that must have been magically reinforced because they looked like they were seconds away from crumbling the moment they were touched.

As they climbed each of the ladders, Neville spoke. "So if you're Harry's father..."

He trailed off curiously though James didn't know what he'd intended to say. "Yeah?" James asked.

"Sorry," Neville said awkwardly, "but isn't Regulus a bit young for you?"

James choked on his spit.

"I just mean," Neville went on, "he's the same age as your son. Isn't that weird? I mean you look really young so maybe... maybe it's not that weird. I don't know. Sorry."

James did his best not to laugh, but he was sure a few snickers spilled out against his will. "It's complicated," he said. "Regulus is not exactly who you think he is."

Neville was quiet for a long stretch before quietly saying, "Oh!" That seemed to be the end of it.

When they made it outside, cold air struck the skin of their faces so harshly that both of them hissed in pain. The dementors that had been forced from the castle grounds had left their mark, no doubt from patrolling the area for so many months before they were sent away. It made for a harshly cold and brittle environment. The sky was covered in a thick, almost black, layer of clouds, and they seemed to only be getting darker by the second.

A storm was brewing, James thought, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. It was only a matter of time now.

They ran at a crouch over the hill heading toward the Whomping Willow, maneuvering behind a tall bush when they saw the Death Eaters guarding the entrance. James was surprised, Regulus had spotted them earlier on the map, and they were so far out from the castle that they likely hadn't gotten any instruction yet behind guarding the secret passage.

"How do you want to do this?" James asked. He thought he should be the one to go in and get rid of them, he was the adult after all, but he wanted to give Neville the opportunity to participate.

Neville chewed on his bottom lip, the cut on his cheek flexing alongside the muscles in his cheek. "I think we should—"

"Neville Longbottom," an old woman said suddenly, the voice drifting from behind them.

"Nan?" Neville asked, distracted enough to forget they were hiding, he stood up and turned his back on the Death Eaters. James look backward as well, though he did his best to stay crouched while also watching the Death Eaters. They didn't seem to have noticed them yet. It might have been the angle.

"They said you were fighting, I told them of course you were," the woman, Neville's grandmother said. James had met her once before at one of his first Order of the Phoenix meetings. Mad-Eye always called her Gussie, though James couldn't tell if that was a nickname or not.

"Nan, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help you," she said simply. James raised his eyebrows at the way Neville responded. He looked more shocked than he'd been when Regulus had told him who James was. James wondered about the relationship between the two of them, he wondered what could have led Neville to look that confused and surprised that his grandmother was going to fight with him.

He glanced away from them, worried he might be intruding a bit, and looked back at the Death Eaters just in time to see them catch sight of the back of Neville's head. He reached up on instinct and dragged Neville down the ground, right in time too because a bright red spell went flying just inches over his head.

"Who is that?" Gussie asked.

"Death Eaters," James said. They'd lost the element of surprise, but that didn't mean they couldn't win. They were outnumbered, but only by five to three, and that seemed manageable enough. It all depended on how well-trained the Death Eaters were, and he wouldn't know the answer to that until he engaged them. "Spread out and try not to get hit," James said before fanning out to the left of the tree.

Distantly, he noticed Neville and his grandmother going in the opposite direction, but once he was spotted, he didn't have time to watch out for them anymore. The spells came at him fast, but not nearly as fast as they could have, and for a while, James felt like he was floating through the fight. He was still sweating, still having to work harder and smarter to stay one step ahead of his opponents, but he felt like he was winning. He was fighting two of them, both women, and though they were fierce fighters, the most difficult part was staying out of range of the swinging arms of the Whomping Willow which threw out its limbs to hit each of them indiscriminately.

It also helped that it seemed both of them were too new to be very accustomed to using Unforgivables.

He got lucky, one of the thicker branches came flying toward them, and though it was mighty, it was also slow. He managed to jump out of the way right in time, his rolling motion just confusing enough for him to get the drop on one of the Death Eaters. She went down with a thud, not dead, but knocked out hard enough that she wouldn't be up for at least an hour.

The other Death Eater redoubled her efforts, but James was prepared. He could feel the months of training with Regulus finally being put to good work. She threw a cutting curse at him, and he used a move he'd seen Regulus use with so much skill that James had wanted to drop to his knees in front of him every single time he'd used it. He blocked the curse with a half-dropped shield, clutched his stomach like he'd been hit, then a second later, when the Death Eater dropped her guard for just a split second, he hit her with a heavy stunning curse.

She fell to the ground right as James dodged another branch from the Whomping Willow. He rolled to his feet, spinning to catch sight of Neville and Gussie, right as the unthinkable happened.

Two spells were spoken on top of each other.

"Expelliarmus."

"Avada Kedavra."

It was a man who said it and James spotted him before he saw where his spell landed. His wand went flying from his hand just as James stunned him from behind. The other two Death

Eaters they were fighting were already down. James ran over, dodging a few more branches, just as Neville began to shout.

“Nan! NO!”

His voice was terrible, grief and shock all rolled into one undeniable heartache. He dropped to his knees inches from where his grandmother was now crumpled in the grass. Even from a few paces away, where James had frozen in place, he could see that her eyes were wide and unseeing.

She was dead.

“No, no! Please! I don’t have anyone else! You have to wake up!” Neville screamed. His voice was hoarse, wretched with panic and sorrow. James didn’t know what to do, but he barely had a moment to think of it because four more people were coming for them already, no doubt drawn by the fighting and yelling.

“Neville,” he breathed, jumping forward to grab Neville by the shoulders. He tried to pull him back.

“No!” Neville shouted, trying to shake James off. It was only because of his additional strength from his lycanthropy that he was able to hold his grip.

“We have to move,” James said urgently, they had only seconds before they were going to be in another fight. “Neville, your grandmother—”

Neville made a sound like a snarl and climbed to his feet. He didn’t run toward the tree like James wanted him to, instead, he spun to face the Death Eaters already pulling wands from their cloaks. He threw his wand to the ground—not a good sign, James thought—and sprang forward fast enough to catch James off guard. His hands lost their grip on Neville’s shoulders and all he could do was watch as the teen charged at the group.

James prepared to fight, to interject a shield to keep Neville safe—he was afraid Neville was going to try and fistfight four Death Eaters—but Neville didn’t need it. He didn’t need help at all.

Moments before the first spell was flung, Neville pulled a vial of sparkling red liquid out of his pocket and threw it at the group like someone might throw a Quaffle. The vial collided with the ground mere inches from the Death Eaters’s feet, and instantly, the ground was swallowed up by a red explosion.

The smell burned James’s nose immediately, but he thought it was something corrosive in the potion. He blinked to clear his vision as it swam with red and discovered that the smell wasn’t just from the potion, it was from what the potion was doing to the Death Eaters.

Their screams... James would never forget them. Pure agony soared through the air like birds free from a cage as the Death Eaters began to melt. It was almost impossible for his brain to make sense of what he was seeing at first, but as the seconds ticked by, he could finally understand.

The potion, whatever it was, was literally burning every piece of the Death Eaters—their clothes, their skin, their muscles, their bones. In no time at all, they would be nothing. And there was Neville, heaving for breath and watching with rapt attention.

“Did you design that?” James asked without meaning to.

“Yes,” Neville said.

“Okay,” James said. What he really wanted to say was ‘We’re going to have to talk about this later’ but he thought that might not be received very well just now, so he kept it to himself until he could consult Regulus.

“Let’s go find Snape,” Neville said gruffly. He turned away from the dying Death Eaters and very carefully did not look at his grandmother.

“But Gus—” James started to stay, but Neville was already moving away, heading right for the Whomping Willow after bending down to pick up his wand. James gave one last regretful look to Gussie, Neville’s last family, and followed Neville, pointing his wand at the flying branches as he went. Typically, when he wasn’t so rushed, he would use the knot at the bottom of the tree to freeze it, but given the way Neville was running forward, he didn’t believe that he had the time.

He froze the branches with a spell—it would only hold for about ten seconds, but at the pace they were moving it was enough for them to slide down into the passageway.

The trek to the Shrieking Shack was deathly still and quiet. The only noises were their shared breaths. James didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t seen someone die like that in so long and as quickly as he could blink his eyes, he kept seeing all the people he’d known during the first war dropping dead in front of him. By the time they made it to the shack’s entrance, there were tears streaking down his face. He didn’t bother wiping them.

“I hear something,” Neville whispered as they approached the trapdoor. He was in a similar state to James, his face blank with tears dropping down it like he wasn’t aware that he was crying. James pushed a little closer to the door and peeked through one of the slats left by a mislaid piece of wood. “It’s Snape!”

Neville said louder than he should and moved to climb through, but James stopped him. Snape wasn’t alone, he realized, and they were only lucky that Neville hadn’t been heard.

“...my Lord, their resistance is crumbling—”

“—and it is doing so without your help,” Voldemort said, his voice an unsteady hiss. James wondered if he’d always sounded like that or if the destroyed Horcruxes were taking their toll. “Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make much difference now. We are almost there... almost.”

“Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please.”

James filled with rage and hate. This was the man Regulus had chosen to trust? He was nothing but a coward, begging for his life, offering to trade over James's son—*Lily's son*—like it was nothing. James was so caught up in his anger that he barely noticed their conversation continuing, not that he cared. He was moments away from turning around and heading straight back to the castle, intending to tell Regulus exactly what he'd seen and heard.

But then he heard the unsettling noise of a snake curling around itself, and his attention was drawn upward.

He should have brought the sword.

At least Regulus was right, Nagini was with Voldemort. All they had to do was find him again to take out the snake.

"You killed the man," Voldemort was saying. "You should have been the one to retrieve his wand, and yet, I am still without it. Even months after his death... nothing."

"My Lord—" Snape sounded afraid, but he was tailoring his voice, clipping it like he didn't want Voldemort to know. James didn't like the way his stomach twisted thinking about that fear. He hated Snape, maybe more than he hated Voldemort, and yet, hearing him like this...

"And even still, would the Elder Wand serve me properly? Would I be its true master?"

"Of course, you would, my Lord."

"While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot truly be mine."

Oh no, James thought, not because he cared for Snape's life, but because Neville was now pressed up against his side, shaking like he'd been out in the frigid cold for hours and hours. His teeth were clacking together slightly and James considered silencing them. A moment later, with only a few more words shared, Voldemort spoke in Parseltongue.

James didn't know what he said, but he thought he could imagine given the way Snape's screams began as Nagini lurched forward, slicing at his throat. Snape hit the floor of the shack loudly just as Voldemort murmured something to himself. A second later, the sound of apparition filled the room and he and Nagini were gone, leaving Snape to bleed out alone.

Neville rushed through the trapdoor before James could stop him. Neville's hands were shaking so badly that he barely seemed to be able to hold onto his wand. James ran up with him, though he wasn't interested in watching Snape die. For all his dislike of the man, he'd seen enough death to last a lifetime and he didn't want to see it again. But Neville... Neville would be alone if he didn't go with him.

"No, this can't be happening," Neville whispered, kneeling in front of Snape. "I don't know how to stop the bleeding." Snape looked up at Neville with a regretful look, the fear gone from his face. In that strange moment, it became glaringly clear that Snape cared for Neville, perhaps in the same way Regulus cared for Harry. And Neville, who had no one else but his

grandmother, no one else *at all* now, seemed to feel the same way if the sobs racking from his chest were any indication.

James sighed, clamping his eyes closed, and drew his wand. “*Accio potion*,” he whispered, quiet enough that neither Neville nor Snape seemed to notice. He couldn’t believe he was doing this. Truly, he couldn’t believe it. If he’d told his sixteen-year-old self that one day he would try and save Snape’s life—AGAIN—he was sure his teenage self would hit him straight in the face.

But Neville had just lost his grandmother, he reminded himself. He couldn’t lose Snape too. Even if Snape had just been bartering with Harry’s life for his own, even if James hated him.

It took a moment for the anti-venom to land in his hand, it had to come from Regulus’s bag and momentarily he worried it wouldn’t come at all, but eventually, it came flying through the trapdoor as if it had followed their exact path. He caught it easily then gently touched Neville on the shoulder.

“Let me,” he said. Neville didn’t seem to want to move, his body shook slightly with the effort it took him to slide over. James shuffled forward into Snape’s line of view and had to witness the moment that Snape realized what was going to happen.

“Oh, no,” Snape groaned, as if he wasn’t the one that was bleeding to death in a shack meant to house a teenage werewolf. He glared at James as James treated his wounds, his lips twisting into sneers every time the pain got a little worse. James, for all that he wanted to be mature, returned the glares with as much anger as he could muster.

It took a long time for the bleeding to finally stop. James wrapped the wounds as best he could but he was never very good at *Ferula*. Snape had long since passed out by that point and James was relieved. He didn’t want to have to *talk* to the man, not after all of this. Neville was shaking next to him, his tears still coming down his face like they’d never quite stopped.

“My Nan,” he whispered. James turned to him and pulled him into a hug, letting Neville cry against his chest for a few long minutes. He’d lost his own parents around Neville’s age and he knew what his pain felt like, but they didn’t have the time to wait around and process it now.

“Let’s take him back to the castle,” James said, gesturing toward Snape. He would still need blood-replenishing potions if he wanted to live, though James didn’t say that to Neville. No use in making him *more* upset.

“Okay,” Neville whispered.

“We’ll get your Nan,” James said. “We can put her somewhere safe until it’s all over.”

Neville nodded, but he seemed beyond words.

James didn’t blame him. He felt a bit beyond words himself.

the magician.

Once James was gone, running off down the corridor with Neville, Regulus missed him like a severed limb. He didn't have time to wallow, but Salazar, he would wallow if he could.

He headed toward the Slytherin Common Room once James and Neville were out of sight, running as fast as he could, though he knew he'd have difficulty getting into the room given that he didn't know the current password. He hoped he would get lucky. He arrived at the entrance, a blank wall between two pillars, breathing heavily. He turned each way, trying to see if anyone might be nearby, but the corridor was empty.

He was about to head back to the Great Hall to find a current student when the door began to open, appearing from the empty wall. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was a little kid, probably a first year, and they looked very confused to see him standing there.

"Who are you?" the kid asked unsteadily.

"It doesn't matter," Regulus said. "You need to get to the Great Hall, you're late."

The kid jumped slightly, looked back into the common room, and then decided to believe him and took off, half skipping toward the Great Hall. Regulus hoped the kid wouldn't get hurt, surely someone else would find him and help him evacuate. He dashed into the closing door, rushing into the common room that he'd once called home.

It was strange to see it so empty, even the fireplaces were dwindling. During his time as a student, he'd loved spending time in the common room because it was always loud and filled with people. He was so lonely at home, though he didn't have the words to say that at the time, and he enjoyed getting to sit around with his friends during the school year.

He barely thought about those friends nowadays. When he'd first come back to life, it had been too painful, their deaths too fresh in his mind. He hadn't forgotten about them exactly, but he'd put them away somewhere that he couldn't see most of the time, protecting himself from who he used to be and the people he once cared about. So many of them paid the ultimate price for joining the Death Eaters, and to what end? Did any of it even matter?

Evan's death played at the forefront of his thoughts. He was taken down in a fight with Aurors, killed finally by Mad-Eye Moody, but he was just a stupid kid. Looking back, Regulus didn't think he was that different from how the Slytherins were now, just a child trying to impress his friends or fight for his family.

Was he wrong to join the Death Eaters? Of course. But did that mean a nineteen-year-old deserved to die? Regulus didn't think so. It seemed like such a waste.

And given how it had twisted Barty's mind, the first pillar dropped from his already unstable personality, it seemed even more awful. Regulus felt bad for Barty, he truly did. Even after their confrontation in fourth year, he couldn't help but feel regret that he'd never gotten the

chance to live a normal life. It seemed unfair, especially given what Barty's father did to him.

"Regulus?" Luna called, dragging Regulus from his musings. He was grateful for it, thinking about his old friends wouldn't do him any good, all it did was make him miserable.

"Luna," Regulus said, purposefully clearing his face. "I came to tell you—they're barricading the school. Tom Riddle is planning to attack."

"Who's Tom Riddle?" Greg asked.

"Sorry," Regulus said. "Voldemort."

Vincent and Greg both flinched at the name, but Luna merely stared back at him unblinking, not an ounce of fear on her face despite the terrible ordeal she'd been through. He often felt that Luna didn't get enough credit for her bravery.

"He's here?" Vincent asked, his eyes wide. Both Vincent and Greg's fathers were Death Eaters, just as loyal as Lucius had been up until a few days ago. They had no doubt heard about Tom Riddle's *greatness* their entire childhoods, they'd likely been primed to join him. He hadn't thought about it, only considering Luna's safety, but they might not be the safest boys to tell about Tom Riddle's attack.

"Are you going to kill him?" Luna asked in that airy, distant voice of hers.

"Yes," Regulus said without pausing.

Luna nodded. "I think that's a good idea." She looked at Vincent and Greg. "Should we join the fight?"

"Join the what?" Greg asked.

"No, I don't think so," Vincent mumbled.

"Yes," Luna said. "I think it would be a good idea."

Regulus couldn't imagine working on anyone, especially the two sons of Death Eaters, but then Greg and Vincent nodded like they'd been convinced. Luna saying they should do something was all the argument they needed. Regulus had seen the way the two boys deferred to Draco during their early years at Hogwarts, but he'd thought that was just because of who Draco's father was. He hadn't realized that was just their personalities.

"Okay," Regulus said, feeling a bit like he might start laughing. "Well, everyone is gathering in the Great Hall so you'd better head up there."

"Yes, we should. Are you coming?" Luna asked Regulus.

Regulus shook his head. "Not yet," he said, unaware that he was going to say that until the words came out. "I'll meet you there."

Luna gave him a kind smile then she waved for Vincent and Greg to follow her. Regulus watched them curiously as the three ran out of the common room together, an odd bunch to be sure. Once he was alone, he turned to look at the windows that looked out into the Black Lake. They'd terrified him a bit during his first few months at Hogwarts, he kept thinking if he stepped too close to them they would break open and drown them all.

He wasn't afraid of that now, he knew that wasn't likely, but even if they did, even if he was flushed with water, he wasn't afraid of drowning anymore.

Regulus ran up to the Great Hall only ten minutes or so after Luna left. He'd given himself a bit of time to say goodbye, should the worst happen. He'd spent years rushing forward, doing everything in his power to keep Harry and the others safe and to kill Tom Riddle. Rarely did he take a moment to think about everything he'd done and everything that had happened to him. He thought back to the boy he was when he first entered the Slytherin Common Room and the boy he was when he left it for the last time.

He'd changed so much since then, and he thought, in that final moment alone, that he deserved to say goodbye to that boy.

If he died facing Tom Riddle, at least he could say that he'd done everything he could. At least he'd tried to make things better.

Near the Great Hall was chaos. There was fighting in the Entrance Hall and Regulus could already see the spell damage on the walls. This wasn't the bulk of Tom Riddle's followers, Regulus knew that for certain. It would be far worse when they broke through the shield. They would be outnumbered then, Regulus assumed. He was sure Tom Riddle wasn't just sitting around for the last year, he was gaining followers, as he always was, and when the shields fell, they would all be at risk.

He pushed open one of the doors to the Great Hall and rushed inside. There were still a few groups in close conversation. All of the youngest students were gone, likely already evacuated, and what remained were several groups of sixth and seventh-years talking to members of the Order of the Phoenix.

"We need to block off the entrances to the castle," Kingsley was saying as Regulus passed. He was talking to Dean, Seamus, and Colin Creevey who were looking up at him with rapt attention like they'd never been given such deference before. All of their eyes were sparkling. Regulus nearly laughed.

"The main entrance is covered," Colin said, "we might need to deal with the boathouse—"

"And the bridge," Seamus added. "We could station a few of us over there."

"Why not just destroy it altogether?" Colin's little brother said. He was younger than most of the people in the Great Hall. He looked like he was only a third or fourth year. Colin seemed shocked that he was there as well, jumping slightly at his voice. The two of them looked nearly identical except for their age, it was almost uncanny.

“Dennis!” Colin shouted. “You were supposed to evacuate with the others.”

“I’m not just going to leave you here by yourself.”

“Dennis,” Colin groaned, stretching out his name.

“That’s a very good idea, Dennis,” Kingsley said, his deep voice drawing every boys’ attention. “Destroy the bridge, make sure no one can cross it.”

“What about the boathouse?” Colin asked.

“We could lay traps along the stairs so if anyone tries to enter that way they’ll be stopped,” Dean said.

“What kind of traps?” Kingsley asked.

“I’m sure they could help you with that,” Regulus interrupted to say, pointing at Fred and George who were talking to their father and Percy. Regulus hadn’t seen Percy in years. Near them were Molly and Ginny locked in a fierce argument, Ginny’s face growing red with anger.

“Great idea,” Seamus said.

The four of them ran off toward Fred and George, Seamus already starting to lay out a plan of how he would demolish the bridge. It was the perfect assignment for him, Regulus thought.

“Regulus Black,” Kingsley greeted. Regulus barely knew the man, he was much older than him when they were at Hogwarts, and Regulus didn’t frequent the Order meetings now. He was tall, towering over Regulus who wasn’t exactly a short man, and he wore thick robes embedded with so much protective magic that Regulus could physically feel the spells floating off of them.

“Yes?” Regulus asked.

“Where is your father?” Kingsley asked.

“My father?” Regulus asked incredulously.

Orion? Regulus thought. He’s dead. Hopefully. For Merlin’s sake, he couldn’t handle seeing his angry and disapproving father now. After a second, his thoughts caught up to him and he realized that, thankfully, Kingsley was not asking about Regulus’s true father. Kingsley had no idea who he really was.

“He’s with his husband,” Regulus said. “They’ll—they’re coming, but they had to do something first.”

“Ah, right, I forgot he got married,” Kingsley said with a smile like he was enjoying a private joke.

“You are not leaving this room!” Molly yelled, drawing both their attention.

“You can’t stop me. I’m helping my friends. I’m fighting,” Ginny said, then turned, her red hair a brilliant fire under the floating candles that still decorated the Great Hall, and ran toward the doors. Colin and Dennis were with her, their hands full of items from Fred and George’s shop. Seamus and Dean were right behind them.

“We have to go after her,” Molly said. “She’s going to get hurt.”

“We will all be in danger here,” Arthur said calmly.

“So I should just let her go alone?”

“She’s not alone,” Fred said defensively, always protective of Ginny.

“You would be more useful here,” Kingsley said, walking over toward them to give them instructions. The castle was way too large to guard every part of it, but by the sound of the plans Kingsley was making, Regulus thought he was going to do his very best to manage it.

“Good to see you, Reg,” George said suddenly, slapping a hand on Regulus’s shoulder, a wide grin on his face.

“You too,” Regulus said. “I heard you’ve been running a radio show?” It wasn’t the time for conversation, but he couldn’t hold back his curiosity. He wished he’d gotten a chance to hear it.

George’s grin spread even wider, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “Just trying to keep the message alive.”

Regulus laughed, then sobered slightly. “Do you know where Harry is?” he asked. He didn’t see him or Draco when he reentered the Great Hall.

“He was heading somewhere,” George said.

“Ron and the others headed out to join the fight,” Fred interjected.

“Speaking of which,” George said pointedly.

“Right you are, George,” Fred said.

As they headed out of the Great Hall, Regulus moved to follow them. He didn’t know many of the other students still inside the room, and he needed to find Harry before he did anything too foolish. If Regulus lost him now, he would never forgive himself. He wouldn’t survive it.

The corridors felt like mayhem personified, wizards and witches dressed in dark, well-tailored robes were throwing spells left and right. He ran out through the front doors to check if Harry was outside, but he couldn’t spot him. Regulus did notice that the thick shield the professors had cast was already falling, it wouldn’t last for very long now. Just outside of it were the dementors waiting to descend down on everyone inside the castle. They would all be in danger, even the Death Eaters, when that happened. Regulus could see movement on the edges of the shield, along the castle grounds, but he couldn’t quite make out what it was. It looked like black smoke swirling around low to the ground.

“What is that?” he asked no one in particular.

“Acromantulas,” Slughorn answered. He wasn’t fighting, he was standing with his wand drawn right next to the front door, looking haggard and drained.

Acromantulas, Regulus thought. With that much movement, there had to be hundreds of them. Hundreds of man-eating spiders. He couldn’t speak, his throat suddenly dry. He ran back into the castle and down the corridor toward the Grand Staircase. He could see fights happening below and above him, but he couldn’t spot Harry among them.

He noticed Tonks spinning her wand around a woman dressed in black Ministry robes, a small laugh spilling from her mouth. He smiled slightly then tucked himself into a small alcove so he could pull the map from his pocket. It took him a moment to find Harry’s name in all the madness.

Harry was on the first floor, not far from where Regulus was now. Draco, Ron, and Hermione were all with him, three names Regulus didn’t recognize and Alecto Carrow were in the hallway with them. Fred, George, and Percy were heading in that direction now. Regulus tucked the map back into his pocket and took off, keeping his wand drawn so he could cast a *protego* whenever he needed to. No one noticed him specifically, but he kept having to dodge rogue spells.

At one point, he passed Professor Sprout and a group of about fourteen students, all wearing earmuffs and carrying potted Mandrakes. “This way, students!” she shouted cheerfully.

All of the paintings were in chaos, many of the people sprinting between each frame, including more than a few of the old headmasters of Hogwarts. Sir Cadogan, the painted knight who’d once acted as the painting entrance for Gryffindor Tower in third year after the Fat Lady was attacked by Sirius, was running from painting to painting, his armor clanking loudly as he shouted encouragement.

“Braggarts and rogues, dogs and scoundrels, drive them out, Harry Potter, see them off!” he yelled. Regulus must have been getting close.

Regulus turned a corner just as the castle shook violently as if it had just been hit by an earthquake. Fang, Hagrid’s dog, barked from somewhere nearby and a moment later, Regulus heard Hagrid shout, “No, Fang, it’s okay!” His loud, thundering footsteps followed as Hagrid chased down his terrified dog.

Regulus sprinted down another corridor, briefly passing Fred, George, and Percy guarding one of the secret passage entrances into the school. They were grinning at each other, even Percy, who looked like he hadn’t smiled in years.

“Nice night for it!” Fred yelled as Regulus ran past, the castle shaking again. Regulus nearly lost his foot, slamming into the wall before righting himself. His shoulder ached and his damaged arm was starting to twinge under the bandages Kreacher had added to it.

He was getting close to where Harry and the others were on the map, only one more turn, but right as he was approaching it, one of the closed doors blew off its hinges and just about

crashed into him. He had to throw himself backward to keep from getting hit.

“Look out!” Blaise yelled from inside. Regulus thought he was speaking to him for a second but when he peaked inside, he saw Blaise and Theo pulled Pansy out of the way just as a Death Eater tried to hit her with a curse. Regulus hadn’t expected any of them to be here still, he thought they would have evacuated or been hiding somewhere. Theo especially after he’d made it clear he wouldn’t fight.

Regulus was still unnoticed, so he aimed his wand inside and took down the Death Eater with ease, watching as the man dropped to the floor in a heap of fabric.

All three of the Slytherins turned to look at him, but Regulus didn’t have time to wait around. He gave them a quick wave and began running again. Harry and the others were still in the middle of fighting Alecko and the others, but neither group seemed to be making much headway. Regulus intended on joining the fight, but before he could reach the group, Harry was hit in the side with a cutting curse. It sliced right through his shoulder, making him cry out in pain. He was only lucky that it didn’t hit his neck.

Draco turned his head, looking at Harry with blazing eyes. Another spell came flying at them while Draco was momentarily distracted, but it hit a magical shield so thick that the spell rebounded and hit one of the Death Eaters right in the chest. Regulus didn’t see any of them cast a shield, and by the looks on Hermione’s and Ron’s faces, they didn’t either.

Regulus ran up next to them just as Draco turned back to the group, calmly placing his wand in his pocket. Regulus didn’t want to know what he was about to do, so he stepped in front of all four of them and started casting spells faster than he ever had before. Alecko must have been injured earlier because he was moving a bit too slow and Regulus was able to take him out without issue. The other two Death Eaters, neither of them wearing masks, looked momentarily over Regulus’s shoulder and then turned like they were going to run away. Regulus didn’t let them, they were out cold in a second.

When he turned back to the group, Draco was carefully casting healing charms on Harry’s shoulder. He wasn’t using his wand, only the tips of his fingers, but Regulus could see the slice wound closing before his eyes.

“Where were you four headed?” Regulus asked, doing his best not to sound accusatory. He couldn’t very well be angry with them for fighting alongside all of their peers. Still, he wished they were somewhere safer.

“Ron and I were helping to evacuate the younger kids,” Hermione answers, slowly dragging her eyes away from Draco and Harry.

“We were going to tell Draco and Harry but we were obviously interrupted,” Ron said, gesturing toward their opponents at the end of the hall.

“All the younger students are gone?” Regulus asked.

“They were evacuated through Hogsmeade. Aberforth wasn’t happy about it, but he let them come through the Hog’s Head,” Ron said, nodding his head.

“So that's everyone?” Harry asked, brushing off his healed shoulder and frowning at the new hole in his sweatshirt.

“Yeah, it must be,” Hermione said.

Ron frowned. “Hang on a moment! We’ve forgotten someone!”

“Who?” Hermione asked.

“The house elves,” Ron shouted. “They’ll all be down in the kitchen, won’t they?”

“You mean we ought to get them fighting?” Harry asked, obviously confused.

“No,” Ron said solemnly. “I mean we should tell them to evacuate. We don’t want any of them getting hurt, and I doubt the Death Eaters are going to be very nice to them. We can’t order them to die for us—”

Hermione gasped, her cheeks turning red as she listened. She ran forward, flinging herself at Ron, wrapping her arms around his neck, and kissing him right on the lips. Ron didn’t even seem shocked, he dropped his wand and responded with such enthusiasm that he lifted Hermione off of her feet.

“Is this the moment?” Harry asked, cringing slightly. Draco had fully turned around, making sounds like he was gagging a bit. When neither Ron nor Hermione reacted to Harry’s words, he added, “OI! There’s a war going on here!”

Ron and Hermione finally broke apart, both of them looking flushed. Regulus shook his head.

“Ron, why don't you and Hermione go tell the house elves to get out?” Regulus asked.

“What are we going to do?” Harry asked. Regulus could tell from his face that Harry expected Regulus to tell him to leave too, to hide somewhere, to not fight, but Regulus knew better. Harry wanted to be involved and Regulus couldn’t take that from him, just as Molly couldn’t take that from her daughter.

“I have an idea,” Regulus said. “Neither of you are scared of spiders, right?”

Ron made a discontented face, but Hermione was already pulling him away.

“Spiders?” Draco breathed.

“Come on,” Regulus said. There was too much chaos now for him to lay in wait for Tom Riddle, Tom had already made the first move and without any warning, so for now, Regulus might as well fight. If he could make it through the wall of acromantulas, then he might be able to get to Tom.

They rushed back through the corridors together, passing by the room Pansy, Theo, and Blaise had been in earlier. It was empty now, though Regulus didn’t know where they’d gone. When they arrived back in the area where the Weasley twins had been waiting by the secret

passage, the castle began to rock again, this time hard enough for Harry and Regulus to fall to the ground. Only Draco remained standing, though barely.

Regulus climbed to his feet right as the passage opened. Death Eaters wearing traditional dark wizard robes and silver masks entered the castle in a hoard, straight through the passageway Fred, George, and Percy were guarding. Regulus, Harry, and Draco ran forward to help right as spells began to fly, jets of light so bright that they were nearly blinding shot off in every direction.

Percy hit one of them and the man backed away slightly, his hood slipping. With another step, his high forehead and streaked hair appeared.

“Hello, Minister!” Percy yelled, shooting a jinx at Minister Thicknesse, the man who’d taken over after Scrimgeour was murdered. Thicknesse dropped his wand and began tearing at his robes in obvious discomfort. “Did I mention I’m resigning?”

You’re joking, Percel!” Fred shouted, overjoyed despite the tight battle he was in with another Death Eater. “You actually *are* joking, Perc. I don’t think I’ve heard you joke since you were —”

The air exploded, all of them, the Death Eaters included were thrown back. Regulus landed roughly just as rubble from the destroyed castle wall crashed down around him, cutting his cheek open and slamming into his ribs. He threw the rubble off of him as fast as he could, claustrophobic under the mess, and climbed shakily to his feet, his breaths coming in painfully.

“Fred!” he heard someone shouting. Regulus’s stomach dropped as he lifted his wand to clear the air of dust and debris.

“I’m okay,” Fred yelled. He was standing against the still-intact wall, Theo Nott right next to him. “Near miss though,” he grumbled. “Thanks, mate!” He said to Theo who looked struck, his face drawn in panic like he couldn’t believe he’d just done that.

“I saw the green,” Percy said, his voice catching slightly. “I thought—”

“I’m fine,” Fred said. His voice was shaking slightly and Regulus could already see George scrambling up to run toward him, he’d been thrown the farthest in the blast. “I’m fine,” he said again, this time with a shaky laugh as George grabbed him by the shirt, looking into his eyes like he was just double-checking.

Regulus turned from the three brothers, relieved that they were all alive, but uncomfortable by their open displays of care for each other. Draco was in the process of dragging Harry to his feet, both of them were covered in dust but they looked unharmed.

“You’re face,” Harry breathed when he laid eyes on Regulus.

“It’s okay,” Regulus said. He glanced around quickly, the Death Eaters were still buried under the rubble. “*Homenum Revelio*,” Regulus cast, just to make sure. Only a few of their bodies

could be seen through the destroyed wall, but it didn't look like anyone was moving. They were alive but likely knocked out.

"Get down," Harry yelled suddenly, just as a few spells came shooting through the newly made hole in the wall. Regulus ducked just in time, trying to move so he wouldn't have to climb over misshapen rocks while he fought.

Percy let out a horrified yell. Regulus's head snapped over to look at him, but he was staring at the hole in the wall, his wand hand shaking. Regulus turned back, his heart jumping erratically. Coming through the wall was a monstrosity-sized spider, nearly the size of the horse-drawn carriages they used to bring students to Hogwarts.

Harry and Fred both hit the spider with a spell at the same time. The spider jolted backward, but not enough, and within a second it was rushing them again. Behind it, Regulus could see the hoard forming, preparing to swarm the castle.

the magician part II.

Chapter Notes

cw: character death, derealization

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took James and Neville nearly half an hour to make it through the tunnel leading back to Hogwarts, Snape floating unconsciously behind them. When they arrived back on the grounds, Neville walked slowly to his grandmother's side and knelt next to her, placing one hand against her sternum. James turned away, giving Neville a moment to say goodbye before they had to head inside.

He could hear fighting all around them, but on that one stretch of ground, they were alone, not a single Death Eater in sight. It was eerie, almost like they were both already ghosts, just floating through the castle unbidden and unaware of the death that surrounded them. They brought Gussie with them up to the castle, moving through the corridors carefully while they kept an eye out for dangers, but they didn't run into anyone until they made it to the Grand Staircase. Even then, all they had to do was step out of the way, two members of the Order were already there fighting.

"Is that Augusta Longbottom?" Tonks said as they approached the stairs. Tears instantly filled her eyes, though James guessed that was from shock more than sadness. Neville made a small wounded noise, and Tonks's head snapped up, her eyes widening. She launched forward, wrapping Neville in a hug. "Oh, no, Neville. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," Neville said roughly.

"We should take her to the Great Hall," Tonks said softly, "that's where they're taking—well—" Her eyes drifted away and finally landed on the other floating body. "Is he dead as well?" she asked, sounding far less sad.

"No," James said. "But he's injured, and he needs help."

Tonks lifted her eyebrow imperiously, making James laugh slightly.

"Believe me, I know, but he's more complicated than you think," James said. *Merlin, I'm defending Snivellus.* Lily would mock him for years and years if she could have seen him.

"If you say so," Tonks muttered. "I think Pomfrey's in the Great Hall as well. I'll lead you both there."

James smiled gratefully, things were getting dangerous. They didn't have far to go to get to the Great Hall, but in that short span, James saw more of the battle than he thought was

possible. He could see Order members and ex-Aurors fighting Death Eaters, real ones, ones that were uniformed and masked. The fights were deadly, Unforgivables falling from their mouths like sweet nothings.

He spotted Parvati and Lavender in the Entrance Hall, right near the front doors. They were fighting with Parvati's sister, Padma, as well as Cho and Cedric Diggory. James did a double-take when he saw him and then quickly searched the area for Regulus. Probably for the best that, Regulus didn't see the man. Regulus didn't give up grudges easily, and he'd hate for him to change sides this late in the war just to have an excuse to kill a random man he didn't like.

Right in front of the doors to the Great Hall, there was a group of three Death Eaters, each of them burlier than the last, fighting against a few students and Professor Flitwick. Flitwick was a dueling champion, he should have been making quick work of them, but he seemed to be moving a tad slowly, like he'd been hit earlier and was still recovering. James didn't recognize the students, but they looked young, younger than Harry at least. Tonks ran toward them just as one of the students, a boy with curly hair, was hit with a killing curse. He was dead before he hit the ground.

James flinched so badly that he nearly lost control of the spells he was using to carry Augusta and Snape. Tonks turned the tides of the fight, James could see that the Death Eaters would lose otherwise he would have joined them. That's what he told himself, at least. He was shaking now, his hands rocking slightly. Neville looked ill beside him, leaning heavily against the wall, his face green and his eyes bulging out of his head as he stared at his dead classmate.

When the Death Eaters were defeated, each of them tied with ropes so tight that their hands were turning purple, James finally ran into the Great Hall, calling for Neville to follow him. He thought it might provide them a moment of peace, but it was *so much worse*. The battle that had seemed so far away just a bit ago was very evident in the Great Hall. Pomfrey and two other students were sprinting around the massive room, trying to heal wounds while people groaned in pain.

Near many of them, they passed the corpses of at least ten different people. It was early, though, there could be so many others...

"Who is that?" Pomfrey asked, her voice sharp.

"It's—" Neville seemed unable to finish his sentence, swallowing several times.

"It's Augusta Longbottom. She's gone, but Snape needs blood replenishers," James said, his voice deceptively deprived of emotion. Pomfrey looked shocked and confused. James didn't blame her, but he was already growing tired of this explanation. "Please, we just need to heal him. I'll explain everything later."

Pomfrey finally seemed to accept that just as she seemed to realize how he was. Her mouth dropped open.

"Neville, stay with Snape," James said. "I have to find Regulus." He couldn't explain who he was again, not with what he'd just seen. Regulus was out there with his son doing Merlin

knows what. Neville nodded. He didn't look okay, he didn't look like he'd be okay for a long time, but James couldn't stay and comfort him. He hated to leave him alone, though.

"Come along, Mr. Longbottom," Pomfrey said, gesturing for Neville to follow her. James watched them go, letting Pomfrey take over the spell he was using on the two people. He glanced around the room again, feeling his stomach twist. He wondered if he would be sick. He felt a bit sick. He shouldn't throw up around so many injured people. It wasn't polite.

He turned in a daze and began heading back to the door. He needed to find a bathroom, so he could vomit. Then he would be fine. Then he would be okay. He drifted out into the corridor, hearing Lavender scream in pain. He might have worried for her if he could feel much of anything, but it didn't matter. The people fighting alongside her corralled around and blocked her from getting hurt further. They would take care of her, James was sure.

He floated down the corridor in the direction of the first-floor bathrooms. People were yelling and sprinting around him, but he felt like he was stuck in a painting, unable to touch the outside world.

"James?" he heard someone yell questioningly. He waved a hand over his shoulder, just a little greeting, as he pushed open the door to the restroom. The bathroom was empty, which James appreciated, he didn't want to disturb anyone. He opened one of the stalls, his stomach twisting further. He didn't even have time to shut and lock the stall behind him before he fell to his knees and lost everything he'd eaten. It wasn't much, they hadn't stopped for breakfast that morning, and the stomach acid burned coming up.

"James?" someone whispered. James couldn't respond, his body shook harshly, tears streaking down his face. There was a hand on his back. When he stopped vomiting, the person spoke again. "James, what are you doing in here? Where is Neville?"

"He's in the Great Hall," James said, his voice scratchy and difficult to understand.

"And he's okay?" Regulus asked. It was *Regulus*, James realized, every muscle in his body relaxing as all the feelings he'd just pushed away from himself came flooding back. He leaned backward heavily, letting Regulus catch him.

"His grandmother died," James said.

"Augusta?"

"Am I the only one that didn't know her name?" James wondered.

"I don't know," Regulus said faintly. "We can't stay here. It's only a matter of time before someone finds us."

"Where is Harry?" James asked.

"We got separated, we're going to meet at the Great Hall. Draco will protect him though. I'm sure of it."

"He's a good kid."

“Who? Draco?” Regulus asked.

“Yeah,” James said.

“I know he is,” Regulus said distractedly. “Come on, we have to stand up.”

He let Regulus drag him to his feet. Once he was upright, he felt himself fill out his body a bit more, he didn’t feel so disconnected. He inspected Regulus and was inspected in return.

“You’ve been injured,” James said, gesturing toward the wound on his face.

“It’s just a cut,” Regulus said. “Don’t worry.” He grabbed James by the hand. “Let’s go, they need our help.”

James followed him out in the corridor. Distantly, he felt Regulus cast a cleaning charm on his mouth, which he found to be a bit odd given the timing. Was that really the most important thing right now? Outside, they were met with three acromantulas, all about the size of Regulus in his bear form.

“*Arania Exumai*,” Regulus cast at each of them. The spiders violently flew back as he and Regulus began running in the opposite direction. The fighting was much denser here than it had been when James had walked with Neville. Regulus was sharp, though, he jumped between fights, helping everyone they came across like he was just there to teach them how to duel. James tried to help him a bit, but after only a few minutes, he decided to focus his energy on keeping both of them alive. Regulus wasn’t watching out for himself.

Around one of the corners, they happened upon Luna fighting two Death Eaters by herself. She didn’t look afraid. James didn’t think she ever looked afraid, but she was focused and quick with her spells. Regulus took one of them out with a stunning spell to the back. The other one was solely focused on Luna, he cast a killing curse without flinching.

James jumped, Luna was right in the way, and killing curses couldn’t be blocked, but then someone stepped out from behind an empty plinth. James hadn’t even noticed them at first, but they towered over Luna as he stepped in front of her. The spell hit him in the stomach.

“No,” the Death Eater breathed. He shed his mask and jolted forward.

“Oh no,” Regulus said at the same moment. James stayed behind as Regulus ran forward, his vision blurring slightly. He could hear what they were saying, but every moment felt like glass cutting through him. It was another student, another young person dead at the hands of an adult.

“Gregory,” Luna cried, dropping to her knees next to the dead kid. Another boy ran to him at the same moment. They looked similar, though James didn’t think they were related.

“How could you?” Regulus whispered. “Your own son.”

The Death Eater made a terrible, wretched noise, and James had to turn away, bending over to rest his hands on his knees.

“Dad?” Harry called suddenly. Harry barely called him dad. The sound of that name made something in him heal just a little, just enough so he could stand again. “Are you hurt?”

Harry sprinted up to him, Draco right behind him, looking sharp and bright as if his skin was starting to glow. Both of their eyes looked wild.

“Oh,” Harry said the moment he spotted what was happening behind James. Draco noticed a moment sooner, his face falling and his skin dulling in an instant.

“Goyle?” he whispered. James was going to be sick again. Another kid. He was just a kid. One of the kids Luna had become friends with, one of Draco’s friends. Regulus had told him about him, he’d mentioned him before.

James had seen people die before, he’d fought in the war last time, at least for a while, but they’d all been adults. They’d all been older than him. Maybe they were still young to everyone else, but to James, they all seemed so old, so capable. And they were giving their lives for something greater. It was horrible every time it happened, but he could handle it. He could survive.

This was different. These were children in a *school*. They should have been safe. They shouldn’t have been forced to fight in some war, their lives shouldn’t have been wrecked by this.

“The spiders retreated, most of the other Death Eaters are gone,” Harry was saying when James drifted back to his body. Regulus was next to him again, but Draco was still gone, likely still next to his friend.

“Why?” Regulus asked.

“No one knows,” Harry said. “They all seemed to turn at the same second like he was able to communicate with them from afar.”

“He probably can,” Regulus said. “We need to regroup. James, come with me.”

James let Regulus take his hand, feeling utterly useless. When he turned around, already mentally preparing himself to see a group of people mourning someone behind him, he found the corridor empty. It was just the three of them now. Regulus and Harry were on either side of him, both of them handling everything much better than he was.

“Have you heard from Sirius?” Harry asked as they walked.

“Not yet,” Regulus said. “I don’t—I would rather they don’t show up at all. Who knows what’s going on out in the forest? This could get a lot worse.”

Harry nodded grimly. “I know,” he said. “I can’t believe Goyle—”

“Yeah,” Regulus said quickly. “Will you find Draco and Luna once we’re inside? Make sure they’re okay?”

“I will,” Harry said. “We need to find Ron and Hermione too if they’re not there.”

“That's right,” Regulus said. “I’ll check the map in a bit.”

“Okay,” Harry said. They walked slowly like they had all the time in the world.

“I’m sorry,” James said quietly.

“Why are you sorry?” Regulus asked as if he really didn’t know.

“I thought I was stronger than this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Regulus said, wrapping an arm around James’s back just long enough to squeeze him close. “You’re perfect.”

Briefly, he noticed Harry give Regulus a look, one that glittered with mischief, and he saw Regulus’s cheeks heat a bit. James felt the ache inside him soften, he felt his stomach untwist, he felt a brief moment of peace in the midst of so much horror. James wrapped his long arms over Regulus’s and Harry’s shoulders. Harry didn’t seem to be one for physical touch, but he leaned into James’s side as they walked, just as Regulus did. As if James wasn’t seconds away from a breakdown a moment ago as if James was the strong one, the one they went to to refortify themselves.

It was loud inside the Great Hall, yelling and crying echoing off the walls. People were standing over the injured, many of them trying to use their rudimentary skills to heal wounds and help Pomfrey. A row of corpses were lined up against the left side wall, Augusta and Greg Goyle among them. Greg’s father was gone, likely tied up with the other Death Eaters.

Harry, to his surprise, gave him a quick hug and then hurried off to where Draco was standing with his other friends. Harry pulled Luna into a hug instantly, holding tight as she gripped him back.

The Weasleys seemed to be intact, James noticed. Even Bill and Fleur had arrived, as well as Charlie. Ron was the only one missing. They were standing near the front door, so they were some of the first to see Regulus.

“Why did they retreat? Do you know?” Charlie asked, approaching them briskly. He was startlingly handsome, his long hair making him look more like a muggle rockstar than a wizard. He’d heard Sirius describe him before, but it was different seeing him in person.

“We have no idea,” Regulus said. “But I wouldn’t expect it to last long. He’s not going to stop until he has control of the castle.”

Charlie looked grim as he nodded along with what Regulus was saying. After a moment, he noticed James and threw his hand out to shake. “Hi, Charlie Weasley,” he greeted.

“I know,” James said automatically. Charlie’s eyebrows furrowed. “Sirius told me about you.”

“Oh, did he?” Charlie asked with a light smile. “He’s not here, is he?”

“Not yet,” Regulus said a little uncertainly. “Are Ron and Hermione here?”

“Yeah,” Charlie said, then pointed toward the back of the room. Ron and Hermione were talking to Neville, James noticed. One of them on each of his sides. There were others with him too, Dean and Padma Patil. Only a little ways away from them were Lavender and Parvati kissing with a fever that seemed wildly inappropriate given how many dead bodies were in the room.

“Oh,” James said without meaning to.

“Yeah,” Charlie said faintly. “Apparently one of them almost died and they’ve been crazy about each other for years.”

“Now, why do you know Hogwarts lesbian drama?” Regulus asked.

Charlie laughed. “Ginny filled me in. Did you know she used to date one of them? I didn’t even know she liked women.”

“Really?” James asked then clamped his mouth closed. He hadn’t meant to speak. Charlie raised his eyebrows. “I’m sorry, it’s just that I’ve only met Ginny a few times, and well…”

Charlie stared at James for a long moment before bursting out laughing, slapping James on the back hard enough to make him jerk forward. He was ridiculously strong.

“So what do we do now?” Charlie asked once he’d calmed. He looked at Regulus as he said it, and Regulus stared back like he couldn’t fathom why he was being asked.

“Who’s been leading things? Maybe ask McGonagall?” Regulus said uncertainly.

Charlie’s bright red eyebrows furrowed, they were very thick and shaped his face perfectly. Truly, he must have gotten the best genes in the family, not that Bill or the twins were bad-looking either.

“I assumed you were,” Charlie said. “You’re the one he’s looking for, aren’t you?”

Regulus’s eyes bulged. “What are you talking about?”

“I heard some of the Death Eaters speaking, they were sent in to find you.”

“Oh, I see,” Regulus said faintly. “Charlie, will you excuse us for just a moment?” Charlie nodded as Regulus dragged James back outside of the Great Hall. The noises from inside fell to a faint hum the moment the doors closed and James felt his shoulders drop slightly.

“He’s looking for you?”

“Of course,” Regulus said quickly. “It makes sense. He wants to know how I’m alive and what I know about the Horcruxes. You and Remus ruined his interrogation last time. He wants to check on the diadem, but he can’t send his cronies in here to search for it. But me they could find.”

“What does this mean?” James asked, his head spinning. The idea of Tom Riddle even *thinking* about Regulus made him feel sick.

"I'm going out there," Regulus said.

"No," James said immediately.

Regulus smiled placatingly. "Yes, James. I'm going to find him and I'm going to kill that bloody snake. No more waiting, no more death. I'm going to kill him."

James blinked at him, he looked angry and dazed which was an odd combination. Regulus knew he'd argue with him, that was just who James was, but he also knew that James wouldn't stop him. Not really.

"I'm going with you," he said finally. Regulus expected this as well, and though he wanted to refuse him, to make sure he went alone, he knew that James wouldn't stand for it. He would put himself in more danger trying to follow him out there.

"Okay," Regulus said with a nod.

"But I need to do something first," James said, some of the light coming back to his eyes. Regulus was relieved to see it, he didn't like seeing James empty like that. All these deaths, they were so hard on each of them, but James seemed to be uniquely affected. Regulus didn't judge, the only way he was able to keep going was by shutting that part of his brain down completely. He knew that if he survived, all the things he'd seen today would wreck him.

"All right," Regulus said. "What do you need to do?"

James's eyes searched his face for a second. "Just wait here, okay? I'll be quick." Regulus nodded, watching curiously as James sprinted back into the Great Hall. He wondered what he was doing and why Regulus wasn't allowed to go with him, but if he was honest, he was just too worn down to chase him.

He still had an impossible task ahead of him and he had no idea how he was going to be able to tackle it. He didn't get a chance to say goodbye to Harry, but he figured that was for the best. He didn't want to worry him more than he already was. He was just grateful that Remus and Sirius weren't here. He hoped they were somewhere safe, so that if he didn't make it, they could be there to take care of Harry. He was nearly an adult now, but that didn't mean he could live without support.

"Okay," James said, running back out to him.

"What did you do?"

"I grabbed this," James said, sounding inexplicably pleased with himself. He held up a few tiny vials of sparkling red liquid. "Just in case."

"Just in case of what?" Regulus asked. "What is that?"

James laughed, sounding a bit off like he was seconds away from losing his grip on reality. "You'll see." He put the vials carefully in his pocket. "How do you want to find Voldemort?"

Regulus led him away from the Great Hall as he explained his plan. It wasn't very detailed, but he was sure that Tom Riddle would be out in the Forbidden Forest, especially if he was using dark creatures to fight his battles for him.

"It would be easier if we had a broom," Regulus said.

"Let's steal one," James said conspiratorially.

"From where?" Regulus asked. They took a shortcut that James knew of which led from a painting in the Grand Staircase that led straight to Quidditch Pitch. "I never knew this was here," Regulus breathed as they exited the passage into the frigid air. James grinned.

"Only Sirius and I knew about it," James said. "It's not even on the map. I doubt it's been used in decades."

Regulus laughed, unwillingly charmed by how proud James seemed of that fact. He kissed him, because he could and because he knew they might not have many kisses left.

"Now where are the brooms? We're nowhere near the storage shed Hooch kept."

"There's another one under the pitch," James said. "I hid it there because I liked to practice on a less upgraded broom when preparing for Quidditch games. That way when I was on my *new* broom, I automatically flew better."

"That's truly insane, do you know that?" Regulus asked. James's smile only widened.

"I know," he said, "but it worked. I won just about every game."

Regulus smirked. "Yeah, there was only one team that could beat you, right?"

James grabbed him roughly by the back of the head and dragged him into a kiss, a laugh on his tongue. It felt, for a moment, like they were teenagers again, kissing under the Quidditch Pitch because no one was around, back when they thought nothing bad would ever happen to them.

"You gave that team an unfair advantage," James whispered. "The rest of the players sucked."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Then you should have picked a better Seeker," Regulus said.

"There were no better Seekers than you," James said honestly. "We knew we'd never have a chance."

"Is that the pep talk you gave to your teammates?" Regulus asked.

"Oh, yeah," James said, then turned toward the empty room. "It's hopeless, guys!" he yelled. "Might as well give up now!"

Regulus laughed. "Hush, you're going to get us caught."

“Right, right,” James said, placing a finger against his lips as if to shush himself.

“Where is your broom, James?” Regulus asked. “If it's even still here.”

“Oh, it's still here. I'm sure of it.” He moved toward one of the notice boards that hung blank on the wall and pulled one of the lights that hung next to it. A small section of the wall shifted and James was able to reach in and pull out a decades-old broom, left to rot.

“If you'd never come back to life, that broom would have been there till the end of time,” Regulus said.

“That was the idea,” James said with a quiet laugh. “I always figured one of us would come back one day, maybe Moony as a professor or something, and they would check on it for me.”

Regulus felt his smile turn sad, but he stopped his thoughts from going any further. There was no use in dwelling on all the terrible things they'd gone through right now.

“So are you going to take me flying or not?” Regulus asked. James's eyes sparkled when he looked up at him, a soft smile on his handsome face.

It would have been fun, had they had the chance to fly together under other circumstances. He'd never flown with another person, but he found that pressing himself up against James's back while James took to the air was exciting and comforting at the same time. The wind whipping through his hair made him shiver, but he felt less weighed down now that his feet were off the ground.

James flew carefully, which Regulus appreciated. He was sure it took a great deal of self-restraint for him to do so. He could practically feel James's inner Chaser wanting to take over and spiral them through the air. He kept them low to the ground, weaving them into the trees of the Forbidden Forest like it was nothing. Regulus, for his part, kept looking in any direction he could, watching out for Death Eaters. Or anyone at all.

The forest seemed abandoned. There were no sounds of life, no regular noises. It was disturbing. It was as if they were the last people on earth.

They moved a bit aimlessly and Regulus was beginning to grow anxious until he saw a group of Death Eaters a small distance away, just far enough that Regulus was sure they weren't seen as he instructed James to land. They tucked the broom under a shrub and knelt so they couldn't be spotted.

“Do you know any of them?” James asked.

“No,” Regulus said, looking at every man in turn. They were wearing Death Eater robes but most of them were ill-fitting, their faces were covered in dirt and grime like they hadn't washed in a long time. “I think some of them might be Snatchers hoping to get promoted.” They looked nervous.

“What do you want to do?”

“We must be on the right track. I think we should try and get rid of them, that way they can’t give away our location.”

“Okay,” James said.

“I have an idea, stay on this side,” Regulus said. He cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and slowly moved around the small area the Death Eaters inhabited, making sure he didn’t step on any rogue leaves or twigs. He made it to the opposite side from James after only a few minutes, and he was seconds from attacking, sure that James would follow suit when someone shouted something.

“I found one!”

It took him a minute to figure out which of them had spoken, but then he realized there was one more unaccounted for. He was directly across from Regulus and he’d just found James’s hiding spot.

Regulus barely thought as he transformed. There were too many for him to use his wand and still win, but a bear, that might confuse things enough for him to get the upper hand. He hadn’t transformed in a while, not since the last full moon, but he was surprised at how good it felt. His damaged arm which had been aching slightly for hours now faded into the background as he lumbered forward and took a lethal swipe at one of the Death Eaters.

The man didn’t even cry out as he fell, his spine severed in one hit, but the others heard the thud of his body falling to the floor and turned. Regulus tried to knock their wands out of their hands, he wanted to get to James, he *needed* to get to James, but he was farther than he realized. One of them hit him with some kind of burning curse, it seared into his side painfully but it didn’t stop him.

He stood on his back legs, preparing to take that man out, but when he was at his full height, an arrow flew from behind him and landed right in the throat. The man gasped and gargled as he collapsed. Regulus turned just as a pack of centaurs came galloping into the area, picking off all the Death Eaters like it was nothing. Regulus transformed back, a bit terrified that they were here to hunt him, but when they all came to a stop, only he and James were safe.

In the haze of it all, he finally recognized one of them.

“Bane?” he asked softly.

“Regulus Black, you have returned,” the centaur said.

Regulus looked around in shock, all of the other men were dead. He’d never seen centaurs fight with humans, he’d only been rescued by one once because he was a child. More than that, he’d been told since fifth year that they were staying out of Voldemort’s war, that they refused to fight.

“Why did you help us?” Regulus asked.

“We know what you’ve done for us,” Bane said.

Regulus's eyebrows furrowed. "Fighting Tom Riddle?"

"Killing the Ministry woman who wanted to restrict our lands. You gifted her to us and the forest when you buried her here."

"Sorry, what?" Regulus asked, a little bewildered.

"They saved our lives because you killed Umbridge," James said with a soundless laugh, his body shaking with it as his eyes squeezed closed. Regulus thought James had lost his mind.

"Yes, that's correct," Bane said. Regulus nearly lost his *own* mind. One of his darkest moments, a moment he'd felt ashamed of for years, and it all led to this, to unexpected allies in a war against the most evil man to ever live.

Chapter End Notes

voldemort never makes his announcements to the other side in this version like he does in canon. my reasoning for that is that (1) he doesn't consider harry to be his number one priority at the moment, regulus has more secrets that he wants and regulus has been the one finding horcruxes and (2) he has far fewer death eaters that he trusts at his side this time around

the star.

Chapter Notes

cw: violence

The centaurs weren't there to fight Tom Riddle. They made that clear immediately, but they did offer Regulus help in finding the man. He and James weren't far off, but he did wonder how much longer it would have taken them to find him without their assistance.

James stuck close to him as they snuck through the trees. They were deep in the forest now, and though they passed countless massive acromantula webs, they didn't see a single spider along the way. They didn't see anything at all, actually. In a forest full of dark creatures, Tom Riddle was somehow the scariest of them all. He'd forced them out by his very presence.

Oddly, as they got closer to where the centaurs told him Tom and his followers were hiding, Regulus began thinking about the basilisk Tom had at his disposal in the depths of Hogwarts. He could have made more use out of it, he thought distantly. For all the damage he'd done, Regulus could only imagine how much worse it would have been had he taken the basilisk with him. If Regulus were in Tom's shoes, he definitely would have stolen the basilisk. A monstrous creature that can kill anything with a look, and it obeys only him? That was an easy yes.

"What are you thinking about?" James whispered. They'd both been quiet for a long time.

"What I would do if I were Tom Riddle," Regulus replied honestly.

"Like what you would do right now?" James asked.

"No, more like things I would have done differently."

James snickered softly. "And what would you have done differently?"

Regulus hummed. "Well, I would have had my basilisk kill your baby, that's for sure."

James sputtered. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah," Regulus said, nodding, "if I heard a prophecy about some weird little baby that was meant to be my downfall, I would use the basilisk that obeyed only me and have him eat that baby."

James's laughter grew. "That's crazy."

"I wouldn't use a spell," Regulus continued. "I mean, look how badly that ended up for him. No, I go right for the eaten by a snake thing."

"Would you let your snake eat *me* too?" James asked.

"Oh, of course," Regulus said, waving his hand around. "You'd just be in the way. I'd probably have the snake eat the whole house, just to be safe. It needs to eat, you know, and I'm sure you'd be very tasty."

"Yeah?" James asked. "Is that what you think about when you're a bear? Do you want to eat me?"

"Sometimes," Regulus replied. "You looked much more appetizing as a deer than a human, though."

"That's a shame," James said with a frown. "I don't think I'll ever be able to turn back into Prongs, so I guess you won't be able to eat me."

Regulus wanted to laugh, but he could hear the real sorrow in James's voice, and it sobered him. "We don't know that for sure," Regulus said. "Remus never even tried to become an animagus. Just because no one has done it yet, doesn't mean it's not possible."

James shrugged. "It's not important," James said dismissively.

For now, Regulus thought.

It was obvious when they came across the Death Eaters. Though they weren't loud, per se, they also had a certain energy about them that bent the natural energy of the forest, like they were somehow pulling in and repulsing everything around them. Regulus kept his Disillusionment Charm going the entire time, though he wasn't sure how well it was working. They would have to move so much that he was afraid they would be caught.

"There," James whispered, his voice just barely above a breath. He grabbed Regulus's chin and turned his head slightly, right to where Tom Riddle was standing alone. The other Death Eaters seemed to be milling about around him, though no one was willing to come that close to him. Near his feet, right along the end of his robe, was Nagini, curling around him like she had a stomach ache. "How do you want to do this?"

Regulus sighed through his teeth. They weren't going to make it out of this, that much he knew. They were outnumbered to a disturbing degree—Tom's army filtered way back into the trees, and there were more people and creatures than Regulus could count. He and James were going to die doing this. They were out of time.

He felt around for James's hand, lacing their fingers together when he found it. He squeezed it lightly, waiting for James to squeeze back before talking.

"I need to distract him," he whispered. "You need to take out the snake."

He heard James swallow nervously. "Okay," he said. He squeezed Regulus's hand again. Regulus didn't want to let him go, but they were out of time. They were out of time. He

rubbed his thumb against the back of James's hand then he let it go, dropping it for the last time.

They were only lucky that Tom Riddle insisted on being in front of his army rather than surrounded by them. Regulus wondered if there was still a collection of them near the castle. Would they attack Hogwarts the moment Regulus attacked Tom? He had no way of knowing, and he no longer had the ability to save anyone else.

He could only hope that the people he loved survived.

The soft sound of James shuffling away from him filled his ears until Regulus was straining to hear it, one last whisper from the man he loved. He waited a few minutes. He couldn't see where James was, but as long as no one started screaming about finding an intruder, then Regulus figured they were okay. He waited and waited, just a few minutes more, until he was sure James must have made it over there.

Then he took a deep breath and prepared to jump out into the clearing.

All at once, the air around him exploded with noise. It seemed like it was coming from every direction. He crouched back to where he was hiding, looking around inquisitively, his heart racing in his chest. It took a moment for his brain to catch up with what he was seeing because at first it just looked like madness.

But then he saw Harry and he knew.

It must have been every single unharmed person in the castle in the forest around them. Regulus didn't know how they'd caught up or how they'd found them, but it was too late to figure it out now, not when spells were already flying.

He watched Harry dodge a curse with a quick roll, jumping back to his feet and in a blink of an eye, taking flight in his crow form, launching himself at the Death Eater he was facing. Draco was right behind him, his eyes solely focused on Harry. He's going to have to deal with the unregistered animagus issue later, Regulus thought distantly.

Not the time, he reminded himself.

Regulus turned his eyes on Tom Riddle. He was just beginning to react, his red eyes blazing. He was lifting his wand as if to fight, but Regulus worried that if anyone but him got too close, Tom Riddle would escape, he would apparate away, putting his own safety above everything else. The group from the castle was still outnumbered, especially as the creatures of the forest began lumbering forward—acromantulas, trolls, and even a few giants popping their heads up from behind the trees—and Regulus knew they might all lose, but he could hope that if he took down Tom Riddle, it would all be over.

He stepped out from behind his hiding spot, noting Hagrid who'd been bound with ropes a bit behind Tom was just beginning to break out of his binds, the ropes twisting and snapping as he pulled at them, the Death Eaters around him beginning to panic.

Regulus, before he drew Tom's attention, threw out a pointed cutting curse, severing one of the ropes that was holding Hagrid, allowing him to shake free at last. Regulus dragged his attention away from the man. If he wanted to win, he had to focus, no matter how much he wanted to help those around him.

"Tom Riddle!" he called, removing the Disillusionment Charm from his body in one motion of his wand. He didn't run forward or start casting any other spells, he didn't try and fight. James was out there somewhere and Regulus needed him to get to the snake if they wanted to win. Until then, Regulus could do nothing.

Tom's red eyes narrowed dangerously, he opened his mouth and let out a string of parseltongue. For a second, Regulus thought he was instructing Nagini, as he'd seen Tom do on occasion, but then he realized that Tom was speaking to him. Perhaps he was unaware that he was speaking parseltongue rather than English. Perhaps he was too torn by his destruction to notice the ways he was slipping.

"You will never win," Regulus said, his voice sharp and decisive. He almost believed it himself, it was that convincing.

Tom's wand motion was wicked fast, a black curse blasting toward Regulus in half a second. Regulus barely had time to step out of the way before it came screaming past. He'd never seen magic like that. *Never*. Even in all his years with his family, a family known for using dark magic, he had never seen a spell come out black. And the noise, it sounded like someone was stabbing a small animal, like it was being pierced by the teeth of a predator.

Tom's rage was palpable, practically visible in the air, like heat coming off a road during a summer day. It twisted the world around them and rotted the trees and plants and dirt. It tugged at Regulus and shot through him all at once, sending a searing pain through his arm with such intensity that he nearly fell to his knees.

He didn't think Tom was purposefully torturing him as he had in Malfoy Manor. It was just the reaction to his magic that twisted him, that curled around Regulus's cursed blood and infected bones, that shattered him.

Regulus barely fought back as Tom stepped toward him, another black curse flying from his lips, the words he spoke spilling out in parseltongue. Even in the inhuman language, Tom sounded unhinged like a man who'd lost his last string to humanity a long time ago and had just had time to realize it.

Regulus had to be quick. Sweat began to drip down his back as he moved, dancing out of the way of Tom's curses. He didn't try it, but he had a very strong feeling that none of his blocking charms would work on them. Much like the Unforgivable curses, these seemed like the kinds of magic that couldn't be stopped once they made their mark.

In his peripheral vision, he saw the war raging around him.

Grawp, Hagrid's half-brother, came running at Hagrid who was in the midst of fighting a hoard of acromantulas, apologizing to each one that he was forced to kill. Grawp was yelling for him. "HAGGER!" he yelled. Grawp, like Hagrid, was only a partial giant, a half-giant, so

though he was massive, towering over most of them including Hagrid, he seemed oddly small in the face of the other giants whose slow legs had finally allowed them to enter the fight.

He was hit was a boulder that one of the other giants was carrying, the noise like thunder rolling through the sky and he fell to his knees, his shoulder badly damaged by the attack. Hagrid yelled in distress, killing four acromantulas with one sweep of his arm, and ran to help his brother.

Neville was there, despite the tragedy he'd endured not so long ago. He was fighting with Dean and Seamus, the three of them throwing items the twins had made at the Death Eaters. They must have been carrying pockets full of the items with the way they were using them, one right after the other so that their effects overlapped. Dean through some Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder and Seamus followed it up with a vial of Fireworks, a product Fred and George had made early on in their pranking career.

Neville seemed to be using the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes' products as well, but every now and then, he would throw a vial that Regulus couldn't recognize and all Regulus would hear was screams of terror or pain. He'd yet to get a good look at what was happening to those hit with Neville's concoctions, but it didn't seem to be good.

Ginny, Charlie, Bill, and Fleur were on brooms—great minds think alike, Regulus mused—and they were diving in and out of the trees, dropping potions and spells on unsuspecting enemies. Regulus knew that Ginny and Charlie were good flyers, but he had no idea that Bill and Fleur could fly that well. They looked like two birds dancing together as if flying a mating ritual, courting one another through their attacks. Each time one of them hit their target, they would look at each other with matching grins and sparkling eyes.

Luna fought alongside Crabbe, both of them moving with a viciousness that seemed unreal. Cho was with them, following up each of their attacks with spells she must have learned at the Dumbledore's Army meetings. She wasn't as fast as the others, but she was tricky, hitting someone when they were already down.

Near them were Arthur and Molly with the twins. They never strayed far from Ginny and the others, even from the way Regulus was twisting and rolling out of the way of Tom's endless curses, he could see the way they moved to follow their children.

Lavender and Parvati were running together carrying bags of crystal balls—honestly, where'd they thought to grab such a thing Regulus couldn't understand. They were both using their wands to lift the crystal balls from inside their bags and throw them at anyone they could reach. The crystal balls would collide with a delightful crash, taking down nearly anyone who was hit.

Tom was gradually trying to move closer to Regulus, he kept having to sidestep as Regulus rolled around him, but slowly, he was inching closer as if he didn't want Regulus to catch on. Regulus didn't care, if anything, it worked out for him as Tom stepped away from his precious snake.

She was a fierce opponent all on her own, Regulus knew, and he could see her uncurling and preparing to attack anyone who managed to get too close.

On a particularly close roll, Regulus felt the tips of his hair singe off. He made a tiny noise, not one of pain or distress, but just of surprise. That was the moment James decided to make his move. He must have been waiting for Nagini to get close enough that she wouldn't see him right away. James jumped out from between two trees, crashing to the ground right next to her with the Gryffindor Sword raised high above his head. He brought it down with a grunt, missing Nagini by mere inches.

Regulus had to drag his eyes away when Nagini turned to spring at James. If he got distracted for even a second too long, Tom would hit him and it would all be over.

Unfortunately, he heard the moment James lost control of the fight because the sword fell from his hands and hit a stone that was half covered in dirt before sliding a few feet away. Nagini lunged at him and James jolted out of the way. Regulus made an aborted movement to help him, the one thing he knew he shouldn't do, and was hit with something he could only describe as pure agony.

Later, when he was in his right mind, he would describe it as something similar to the Drink of Despair, a curse meant to pull his body apart while destroying his mind. It only struck him on the side so he didn't get the full blow of it, but it was enough to twist the world around him into something unrecognizable, as if reality was melting down the trees and rain was washing away everything he knew.

Around him, the world turned shifted like he was looking at one of the paintings in the castle. It was all so flat like even if he tried, he would never be able to reach out and touch any of the people around him.

Tom laughed, high and unsettling. He tipped his head back and smiled as if in relief, as if this was his first good moment in years.

Regulus searched for his wand. He'd dropped it somewhere at his feet, and with the last shreds of his brain, he knew he had to find it to do something, he had to protect himself.

"There!" he heard a man yell. Regulus looked up at him, he was standing in one of the paintings, framed with gold, a man dressed all in silver. He lifted his sword—his wand and hit a crow that was flying toward him, the crow spun out and crashed to the ground. A terrible scream went through the air, so piercing that Regulus wondered if his ears would bleed, then from behind them the man came the most enrapturing creature Regulus had ever seen.

It looked like a man but with feathers stretching down his body like a bird. He had impossibly large wings that shone like sunlight, glowing so bright that they hurt Regulus's eyes. The man took flight soaring straight up in the air and then descended straight down at the man dressed all in silver. He did not even have time before he was split in two, the blood from his body splattering out of his painting frame and spraying on everyone around him.

The crow was no longer a crow, he was a boy, a boy who was staring at the beautiful winged creature with his mouth hanging open.

“Draco?” he said with a shaking voice. The winged man—Draco—it was Draco—Regulus knew Draco, turned to look at him, his eyes sharp with anger. “What?”

Another man dressed in silver—dressed in black with a silver mask tried to attack the boy, Harry, Harry, *Harry*, but Draco was blocking him in an instant. Regulus turned away from the two as Harry jumped to his feet, running to Draco as if to stop him. His white wings were already covered in blood, what more could happen to him?

A loud rumbling sound came from the opposite direction and Regulus turned to see a blue muggle car rolling from one painting to another, crashing into the dark creatures that were spilling out of the trees, creatures Regulus had never even seen before, creatures so twisted and horrifying that they seemed impossible.

Regulus turned back to Tom to find him watching the car with a smirk. When his red eyes landed back on Regulus, parseltongue began spilling from his twisted mouth.

“I can't understand you,” Regulus said finally. The paintings were starting to fade, the pain that wrecked his body was falling into the background. He climbed to his feet on shaky legs while Tom paused.

“You’re going to lose,” Tom Riddle gloated. Regulus didn’t know how he knew, but then Tom stepped to the side slightly and revealed Nagini behind him. She was wrapped tightly around James's neck, his beautiful face turning a bright shade of red as he fought to remove her from him.

“No!” Regulus gasped. He tried to run to James, but Tom knocked him back down with a simple stinging hex, almost an insult now.

“He’s yours, isn’t he?” Tom asked. “He looks so familiar.”

“Let him go!” Regulus cried.

Tom turned to look at him, the madness that Tom wore like a uniform earlier seemed to fall away from him, and though he still looked deformed, Regulus could see the man he'd met decades ago materializing in front of him. He was still brilliant, still calculating.

“No, Regulus Black,” Tom Riddle said. “I will *never* stop, and you—” he took a gliding step forward. “You’re going to stay right by my side and *watch*.”

Regulus let out a shattered noise, he could hear the sounds of death and fear around him. Tom was right, despite their valiant fighting, they were all going to lose. And Nagini remained alive and unharmed. He stared up into Tom’s fathomless expression and saw his future laid out like a dark premonition. He wasn’t staring down death like he thought, he was staring down years of torture and punishment, of pain and hopelessness.

Only the soft cry spilling from James’s lips only a few yards from them pulled him from his ruinous mind.

He couldn’t let James die.

Three things happened simultaneously.

Regulus, who'd been solely trying to distract Tom Riddle, up until that moment, jumped to his feet with as much grace as he could manage. He gathered the rage he felt at watching the love of his life suffer and shot out the spell he barely used. "*Crucio!*"

Tom was too cocky to be afraid of Regulus, he was already so sure of his victory that Regulus was able to get the upper hand, severing the sound of Tom crying out in pain as he fell to the ground.

At the same time, two more people came sprinting through the trees from the direction of Hogwarts. Regulus only noticed them because of how fast they were moving, running hand in hand, their matching blonde hair flying behind them. They separated right as they saw Regulus and Tom, and Regulus watched, the torture curse still flowing freely from his wand, building from the years of rage he'd repressed, as Narcissa and Lucius ran in opposite directions.

Lucius ran to his son. Draco was now fully transformed and unleashing a hellish violence on anyone that came near Harry. Harry did not look horrified, as Regulus thought he might. He seemed, oddly and disturbingly, delighted by this turn of events. Lucius jumped right in to help him, sparing only one small glance for Draco before he was fighting his own—Death Eaters he'd likely known for years and years.

Narcissa ran in the other direction and at first, Regulus didn't know what she was running toward until she drew her wand. A curse fell from her delicately painted lips and landed on Nagini's side. Nagini couldn't be harmed, not truly, but it was enough to shock her and she released James just long enough for him to scramble backward trying to catch his breath.

The sword had fallen somewhere in the dried leaves and roots on the forest floor, Regulus didn't know where, but he could see James searching for him.

Not even a beat after Narcissa and Lucius appeared, another group came crashing through the trees. They were coming from deeper in the forest so at first Regulus thought they were monsters. When he looked up at them he saw wolves, hundreds of wolves, but he blinked and his vision cleared, Tom's curse still playing tricks on him, and he saw they were men and women.

And at the very front were Sirius and Remus, Sirius in animagus form, growling loudly.

They plunged onto the group of Death Eaters and monsters instantly and Regulus allowed himself only a moment to appreciate them before he turned back to Tom. His *crucio* was beginning to fail, he could already see Tom fighting it, but he'd expected that. He wasn't as hateful of a person as Tom Riddle was, he had no hope of holding him down forever, but it had done enough.

The moment his curse dropped, they launched into a fight so quickly that Regulus was barely tracking it. He let his hours and hours of practice take over and allowed his body to make the decisions for him.

“The snake, the snake!” James was crying out somewhere near him. A dog barked and James grunted. “Neville, it's next to you!”

Neville's name pulled his attention away and his eyes left Tom just long enough to see Neville dive for something on the forest floor and stand with the sword in his hand. He didn't pause for a second before swinging it back down, his aim impeccable and Nagini too distracted by Padfoot who was snapping harshly at her.

The sword collided with her body right as Regulus's wand was thrown from his hand, flying through the air right into Tom Riddle's palm. He felt the world move in slow motion as he looked back at the man he'd been trying to kill since he was a teenager and took one step back.

He could tell by Tom's face that he knew Nagini was dead. And even more than that, he could see that Tom was about to do the one thing Regulus was worried about. He was going to run, and he wasn't going to leave without Regulus.

Tom pointed his wand at him and started to speak, the first syllable of what must have been *Accio* leaving his lips right as someone else screamed.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” The green light hit Tom Riddle before he even had the time to turn and see who his attacker was.

Regulus blinked, taking another step back as Tom's red eyes went dull and he began to fall, slowly, slowly, slowly to the ground. His body fell with a deafening thud, silence reigning in the forest around them. Regulus shook, his breathing ragged as he waited for Tom to wake, to stand to his feet once again, to respond with enough violence to kill them all.

But he did not move.

He was only a husk, a soulless body. He was nothing but a dead man now. Nothing but a corpse.

Regulus lifted his head slowly, seeing James across from him. James stared back and for a second, Regulus thought he was the one to cast the curse, but then he turned his head. Regulus followed his movements, twisting to the left to see Harry with the wand Dumbledore had left him, his face pale and dotted with blood.

A second passed, the longest second of Regulus's life, and then chaos erupted around them.

the star part II.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Voldemort's forces fell quickly after the man died. There had been a last-ditch effort to attack from some of the less intelligent dark creatures, but once the dementors fled the forest, their darkness lifting the sun peaking through a cloud, the rest of his side seemed to realize the fight was lost. Death Eaters, some of the smarter ones at least, began apparating away in a panic. Creatures started running back into the depths of the forest, disappearing from view.

The giants were the last to fall, brought down by a mix of spells and potions from Neville.

In the silence that followed, Sirius could see that more than two dozen were dead, though he couldn't tell from first glance if they were on Voldemort's side or theirs.

He and Remus had only caught the tail end of the fight, Remus had wanted to warn the werewolves that Voldemort would likely fall. He hadn't gone to ask them to fight, he told Sirius that he'd been expecting opposition from them given the discord Fenrir had been sewing there for years, but the moment they arrived, Sirius could see the tides turning in their favor.

He remained as Padfoot as they approached, agreeing with Remus that him showing up with a pureblood wizard probably wasn't the smartest or safest idea. Remus walked in with his shoulders hunched, a worried line between his eyebrows that Sirius desperately wanted to press until it disappeared.

They'd barely had any time together since Sirius and Regulus were rescued from Malfoy Manor. He knew why, he understood why they had to move quickly, but he regretted not getting to spend more time with Remus. He could see the way the stress of what had happened was dragging him down and it made Sirius feel like a huge piece of shit.

Padfoot's senses were overwhelmed when they walked into the dilapidated house that the werewolves were living in, he was inundated with scents and sounds, but his attention was still glued to Remus. He nodded at two young men when they spotted him and then asked them to gather everyone, saying that he had to speak to them.

The moment Sirius saw the way those two men listened to Remus, he knew they would fight. He could feel it in his bones.

Though Remus hadn't spent much time with the werewolves since the second war began, it was clear that they remembered him and looked to him as someone worthy of following. Sirius wholeheartedly agreed. Remus was kind and wise, he was tall and noble, he was everything. They'd be idiots not to listen to him.

They agreed to fight, much to Remus's chagrin, and within a few hours, Padfoot was traversing the forest, sniffing out the hoard of Death Eaters he could sense the moment they

arrived. The dementors weighed heavy in the air, most of them floating in packs through the trees. Remus kept them at bay, but it didn't mean that they didn't still have an effect.

The closer they got to Voldemort, the less dementors they had to fight. It seemed even they didn't want to get close to the man.

The fight was quick once they arrived. Padfoot immediately ran to help James, seeing that he was lying on the ground gasping desperately, Narcissa standing next to him looking dazed. Killing the snake wasn't easy, but they managed it, Neville Longbottom taking the final swing with the sword of Gryffindor.

A second later, Voldemort was dead at the hands of Harry Potter.

Sirius struggled to understand everything that was happening so he transformed back into a wizard, letting his thoughts clear from the limited avenues Padfoot had available. James and Regulus moved in tandem toward Harry right as Harry dropped the wand he was holding, his eyes rolling back in his head.

It was a terrible thing, casting an Unforgivable, but it was also especially difficult. Not just because the caster had to have incredible focus and enough hate in their heart to manage it, but because it was physically taxing, like lifting a very heavy weight. Harry looked exhausted as he began falling to the ground.

Before Regulus or James could reach him, a giant white bird swooped out of the sky and caught him, cradling him so he didn't crash into the dirt. Right as Sirius realized that the bird he was looking at was Draco, full male Veela Draco, he heard someone shout, "Look out!" from behind him.

The fighting was still going on at that point and Sirius had to let Regulus, James, and Draco deal with Harry. He fought his way through to Remus, just to make sure he was safe, and then let himself enjoy the final moments of battle, the final sting of the war, floating away like dust.

When it was all over, Remus turned and kissed Sirius roughly on the lips, just once, before he started helping. He was so perfect, Sirius thought, just a bit lightheadedly.

Remus checked the werewolves first, there were only a handful of fatalities luckily. After that, he and Sirius moved on to everyone else. It didn't seem like anyone that Sirius knew personally was dead, which he considered himself lucky for, he knew better than most what it felt like to lose someone in battle.

There were nearly thirty dead Death Eaters, at least that was the estimate they made. It was a bit hard to tell because it looked like more than a few of them had been torn to shreds by some kind of animal. It was only when he drifted back to Draco that he realized who it must have been. His white wings were dripping with blood. The sight made Sirius gagged slightly.

There were also quite a few that had been 'disintegrated.' At least, that was what McGonagall said. Sirius tried not to think too closely about what that could possibly mean.

He managed to get a hold of himself before he walked over. Lucius and Narcissa were sitting on the forest floor near their son, Lucius's arm around Narcissa's shoulders. It looked like Lucius was injured, but clearly, it wasn't life-threatening enough for them to be concerned. He looked unusually pale though, his robes torn in several places from curses. Narcissa's hair was sticking up in odd places, the only evidence of the battle she'd just been involved in.

They were both looking at their son with worry.

"Why won't he change back?" Lucius asked, his voice rough, as Sirius approached.

"I don't think he'll be able to until Harry wakes," Sirius said. Lucius glanced up at him in surprise.

Regulus and James were sitting on either side of Draco who was hunched over a passed-out Harry, his wings spread wide around his body. When Regulus inched forward, just a bit, more to adjust the way he was sitting than to touch Draco, Draco reached out a long, clawed arm and took a vicious swipe at him.

Regulus jerked back and looked up at Sirius in distress.

"It's okay," Sirius said joyfully. He didn't know for sure, none of them did, but he knew freaking out about it wasn't going to do any good. "He's just gone through something traumatic, just give him a moment to regain his self-control." Sirius sat down on the ground next to Regulus as he spoke, putting his arm around his little brother. "You okay?"

"I'm—" Regulus began to say, intending to shake off Sirius's arm. He didn't want to worry him, not when they had so much else to worry about.

"Voldemort hit him with a curse. He could barely stand," James said, pointing at him like he was informing a professor of a rule Regulus had broken.

"Tattletale," Regulus hissed.

"What curse?" Sirius asked, his voice growing worried and his arm tightening.

"It was nothing," Regulus said exasperatedly. "It's already fading. I think I'll be okay."

"We'll have to—" Sirius started to say.

"Someone can check me for lingering curse damage another time. There are a lot of people hurt worse than me," Regulus said, then glanced at Lucius. "Like him for instance. I'm almost certain he's bleeding to death."

Lucius blinked up at him. "Am I?" he asked, sounding disturbingly like Gilderoy Lockhart.

"How's your arm?" Sirius asked softly.

Regulus did his best not to roll his eyes. "It's fine," he said, though when he tried to move it he found that his fingers would barely respond to him. He took a deep breath. He would deal

with it later. “How long do you think Harry will take to wake up?” Regulus asked.

“Not sure,” Sirius said. “Shouldn’t be too long. I think I was out for half an hour the first time I cast an Unforgivable.”

Regulus tilted his head in surprise. “When have you ever cast an Unforgivable?”

“You forget that we had the same upbringing,” Sirius said darkly, though his face quickly fell into one of embarrassment and guilt. “I was fourteen I think. I was afraid father would—I was afraid he would go too far and I wanted to know that I could kill him... if I had to.”

Regulus’s eyebrows furrowed. “Father barely punished you. All he did was lecture you.”

“He punished you,” Sirius said.

That stopped Regulus in his tracks. When he spoke again, his throat was tight. “Oh, right,” Regulus said. “I’d forgotten about that.”

He turned back to Draco, watching his wings flex and shift with every deep breath the boy drew in. He must have been so afraid watching his mate run into battle, nearly die likely more than once, and then collapse after killing Tom Riddle.

Regulus still couldn’t wrap his mind around that point. Tom Riddle was dead. And Harry had killed him.

It didn't seem real.

He wondered what people would say. He wondered how Harry would feel. It could weigh on a person, it could even destroy them, committing murder like that. He didn't even realize that Harry *could* cast the killing curse. He was still so bewildered and overwhelmed. He wasn't sure he'd taken a full breath since Tom Riddle died.

Finally, he heard a soft voice.

“Draco?” Harry said faintly, his voice muffled from Draco’s wings. Draco's back heaved, a sob tearing out of him. Harry’s arms appeared from beneath Draco’s wings and wrapped tightly around Draco’s neck, pulling him in. The feathers that stretched the length of Draco’s body slowly started to fade, folding up against him and disappearing from view until it was only the wings left, Draco's face tucked into Harry’s shoulder. “I’m okay,” Harry was saying.

When Draco finally pulled back, he looked human again. The wings remained—Regulus doubted he even remembered he needed to put them away—but otherwise, he looked like his normal self, though his eyes were very red from crying. Draco looked at Regulus and Sirius first, his bottom lip wobbling dangerously, but when he glanced over and saw his own parents he lost it again.

“Oh, Draco,” Narcissa said. She was crying too. Harry sat up quickly, moving so that Draco could finally go to his family, all of them reuniting. Harry gave them one soft look and then turned to look at Regulus, a frown on his face.

“Are you okay?” Regulus asked, his voice a gasp. He could barely breathe. Harry’s eyebrows furrowed and then he threw himself forward, right in-between Sirius and Regulus so they were both forced to catch him. Regulus’s arm wrapped around Harry instantly and he finally, *finally* was able to draw a full breath.

“I know you said you wanted to try first—” Harry started to say.

“Don’t,” Regulus said quickly. “You don’t need to say anything. You’re okay, you’re safe. We’re all safe. I’m not upset,” Regulus whispered quietly and felt Harry relax against both of them. It was a bit awkward, all of them sitting on the ground, but Regulus refused to move. He’d thought the worst would happen, he’d been planning for it for years, and now...

What now?

The three of them stood after a bit, and once Harry detangled from them he turned to hug James just as tightly. James’s eyes closed for a moment while he hugged his son, but when they opened, he stared right at Regulus, longing and hope and love and so many other emotions Regulus couldn’t even begin to name all floated to the surface.

“Sirius, you’re here!” Charlie Weasley shouted, jogging over. He and Sirius embraced quickly, both of them grinning.

“Charlie! Why aren’t you in Romania?”

“I couldn’t leave my parents alone in this,” Charlie said. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Me too,” Sirius said with a sigh. Regulus moved away from the two of them, letting them catch up. He left Harry with James and Draco with his parents and went to check on everyone else. Remus was nearby speaking with a group of young adults who were all staring up at them with stars in their eyes. He lifted his head to grin at Regulus when Regulus came near, but then his eyes drifted over to where Sirius and Charlie were talking. His smile dropped faster than Regulus had ever seen. Regulus had to work not to snicker.

Most of the professors were out there with them, gathering up the dead and injured and conjuring stretchers to take them back to the castle. There was a group of bound and unconscious Death Eaters nearby, they’d be in an unfortunate position when they woke.

Regulus didn’t spot Lavender and Parvati at first, but they spotted him and he was nearly taken out by their group hug. He laughed, a true, loud laugh, and that seemed to draw the attention of everyone else nearby.

After that, Regulus didn’t have a moment to himself for almost an hour. There were so many people to check in on, so many people to speak to. Luna and Neville were the hardest, both of them stricken by grief, but he could see that they were trying to hold it together. Crabbe was sticking close to Luna, but Regulus could see that he felt out of place. Only when Theo, Blaise, and Pansy arrived did he relax slightly. The three of them welcomed him with open arms, the four Slytherins disappearing up to the castle with Luna in tow.

Regulus wanted to feel elated. They'd survived. And though some people had died, it wasn't nearly as bad as he'd feared. They'd won.

Somehow he couldn't bring himself to believe it though. He felt like he was floating through a dream as he spoke to everyone who'd fought in the battle.

At some point, James came to stand next to him, and Regulus gratefully leaned into his side. He was exhausted, he realized. Very, very exhausted.

He scanned the forest as James wrapped an arm around his waist. It was already beginning to clear out, everyone heading back up to the castle. Regulus saw Draco walking with both of his parents and Sirius, the four of them talking intently while Draco limped between them. His wings hung tightly to his back as if he was trying to keep them out of the way.

Regulus was a bit surprised that he didn't see Harry with them, but when he searched for him he found him talking to the one man Regulus couldn't stand.

His voice came out as a growl as he said, "Is that Cedric—"

"Nope," James said simply. "Cedric died. Didn't you know that?" He used his hand on Regulus's waist to turn him in the opposite direction. "He's been dead for years. You never have to worry about him again."

"Let me go," Regulus said fighting him weakly.

James barked a laugh. "No," he said. "I'm never doing that."

Regulus dragged his eyes away from Cedric and Harry, finally facing the direction James was leading them. He sighed and took in James's exhausted face. He had bruises forming on his neck from where Nagini had nearly killed him. Regulus lifted the fingers on his good hand and brushed them against James's wound. James's eyebrows furrowed in pain as he did so and Regulus pulled his hand away.

"James," he said. James slowed to a stop, turning slightly to look at him fully.

"Yes?" James asked intently.

Regulus kissed him, just a touch of the lips, but for long enough that he was out of breath.

"Take me home."

Chapter End Notes

this might be the shortest chapter in the entire fic but i said what i needed to say. one more to go...

the world.

Chapter Notes

first of all, i'm sure this chapter is full of typos. just know that i haven't slept since mid-january, and definitely not for the last week, so i am nearly delirious. in a week or so, i'll go back through a fix them.

well here it is, my final chapter. it's a behemoth so i hope you're ready. i've been planning this chapter from the very start. there have been so many plot threads i created just so they could finish in this chapter.

the original name for this was 'the ten year christmas' but by the end, i felt that 'the world' worked much better.

cw: there are small smut scenes in almost every single year. i think they're easily brushed over, but just keep that in mind.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1998

The first Christmas after the war ended, after Tom Riddle was killed, the Christmas of 1998, Regulus woke the same way he had every day for the last four months. He gasped awake, sweat dotting his forehead, his vision blurred from stress, one of his hands shaking. He immediately tried to close his other hand into a fist, doing so before he fought his way out of the panic, and found that it wouldn't respond to him. It was going to be one of those days.

His heart rate slowed as he focused on his breathing. He'd been trying to work on that lately, not letting his fears get to him so much. The only way to manage it was to breathe through it, that's what his healer said. She wasn't a mind healer, just the healer who treated his arm, but she knew a thing or two about managing the mental effects of the war. Most people did by that point.

Once his vision cleared and his body relaxed back into his bed, he looked over at James. He was snoring slightly, as he always did when it was this close to sunrise. He never snored first thing after falling asleep, it was only deep into the night when the snores began to spill out of his open mouth. Regulus liked the sound, it reminded him that he wasn't alone, that there was always someone next to him when things got bad again.

James's arm was slung over his waist, his fingers digging into his hip slightly. He was a clingy sleeper, had been since childhood apparently. James had shared more than a few stories of clinging onto his mother when sleeping in the same bed as her as a little kid. More disturbingly, he'd shared *too many* stories about sleeping in the same bed as Sirius when they

were students and how he'd always wake up grasping onto Sirius so aggressively that Sirius couldn't move an inch.

"Merlin, why were you sleeping with Sirius?" Regulus had asked the first time James brought it up.

James merely shrugged, unbothered. "I was homesick and Sirius didn't like sleeping alone. This was before him and Remus, you know—"

"Started shagging?" Regulus asked with a quirked eyebrow.

James nodded emphatically. "After that happened, Remus did *not* appreciate Sirius and I sharing a bed. One of the times we did, after Sirius had a particularly bad nightmare, we woke up to find Remus standing over us, right next to the bed, eyes glowing and everything. Damn near pissed myself."

Regulus laughed. "You're all ridiculous," he told James. "And to be clear, if I catch you sleeping in bed with my brother, I'm going to do a lot worse than stare at you with freaky werewolf eyes."

"As you should," James replied, kissing Regulus through his grin.

The memory made him smile now. He didn't mind that James was a clingy sleeper. It made him feel safe, waking up and instantly feeling a warm body wrapped around his. And on his bad days, when he wondered why James bothered to love him at all, that clinginess would keep him steady.

He lifted his good hand and ran his fingers lightly over James's cheek. James made a low humming sound in his sleep, leaning into Regulus's touch slightly. He looked a bit like a dog when he did that. It would have unsettled Regulus had he not grown very accustomed to James in his werewolf form acting the exact same way.

Things with his lycanthropy were easier now that they had regular access to Wolfsbane Potion and an entire group to transform with. Regulus, James, Sirius, and Remus always went out to Black Manor to transform, there was a lot of land to run out there, and with a large dog and bear there to keep the wolves in check, full moon nights had become something fun rather than something dreaded.

James called the group his pack. Regulus had been annoyed by it at first, too upset by what had happened to James to find any humor in it, but then Remus smiled like it was the only thing he'd ever wished for and Regulus let it slide. James might have been joking or he might have been serious, Regulus struggled to tell most days, but it made Remus happy and that was enough. How strange, Regulus thought as the months passed, that Remus's happiness had become something Regulus worried about.

The best nights were the ones where Harry joined them. He couldn't handle them at first, the weeks after the Battle of Hogwarts making him irritable, racing thoughts stealing sleep from his delicate disposition. Not to mention that Draco was not comfortable with Harry being around werewolves, even with Wolfsbane Potion. He tried to be, Regulus could see that, but

the first two times Harry tried it, Draco showed up half transformed and fully out of his mind, hissing and slashing at Remus and James.

Being a Veela wasn't easy, it stole bits of Draco's self control and kept him locked in a cage of trying to keep Harry safe.

He settled eventually, a little at a time, and Harry had been joining them ever since. Regulus loved it, seeing Harry soar high above them and dive like he would on a broom just to play with Sirius and James was something special. He seemed so young in those moments, just a little kid playing with his father and godfather.

They were a week away from the new moon, the moon had already started to fill in the sky, and James had been getting more and more handsy. He was always a little handsy, not that Regulus was complaining, but as they approached the full, he would start grabbing Regulus whenever he had the chance. It wasn't always sexual, though admittedly it usually turned in that direction when the two of them were alone. Most of the time, it was almost unconscious, like an animal rubbing up against another, just trying to feel close and connected.

Regulus would have to keep an eye on him throughout the day. He didn't mind the way James reached for him, the way he grabbed his hips or held the back of his neck or randomly grabbed Regulus's arse like he needed to touch it to focus, but he didn't want to make anyone else uncomfortable.

Sirius hated it—naturally, that was to be expected—but Regulus did not care about grossing him out. He'd spent far too long hiding his love for James. If his brother wanted to throw a fit, then Regulus was happy to give him a reason to.

It was different with everyone else though. Though Harry was very supportive of their relationship, seemingly elated that Regulus had found someone to be happy with, Regulus also noticed that he quickly averted his eyes when he saw Regulus and James acting like a couple. Though he supposed that was the best case scenario given how worried Regulus had been about Harry's reaction to them.

He'd seemed pleased at the battle, but Regulus didn't know how much of that emotion would change once things calmed down.

Regulus was too afraid to ask about it. In the end, it was James who got the truth out of him.

"He told me not to break your heart again," James told him. Regulus gasped slightly.

"He *what*?"

James nodded seriously. "He was quite direct about it. He will not be happy with me if things between us don't work out, so I'm afraid you're stuck with me forever. I can't have my own son disliking me."

Regulus didn't know whether to laugh or not. James seemed so solemn as he said it.

"Are you upset?" Regulus asked him.

“At Harry?” Regulus nodded. “Of course not. He cares about you a lot, and I have to be honest, that’s my favorite quality in a person.”

Regulus gawked. “Your favorite quality in a person is them caring about me?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes,” James said without hesitation. “You’re my favorite. Someone loving you means they have good taste.”

“James, that’s—well, insane but also very sweet, but then why do you seem upset about what Harry said?”

James finally smiled. “I’m not upset, but I know he’s not joking. He’s being serious, it’s only fair that I act serious too. You and I, we’re not a joke. I want you to know that.”

Regulus was touched, though he hadn’t known how to say that then. He still didn’t, he still felt that swelling feeling inside his chest that made breathing a little difficult every time he looked at James and remembered what he’d said. He felt it a bit when he looked at Harry too. He’d loved Harry as if he were his own son, he’d felt that way for years without realizing it, but he’d also thought he’d never have to examine those feelings. He’d thought he would die before he got the chance.

Now, with no more threats on the horizon, he had to come to terms with the fact that he thought of Harry as his when that just wasn’t true. Harry might care for his wellbeing, but Regulus wasn’t his father or his godfather, he wasn’t anything except a stranger who’d forced his way into Harry’s life.

It was starting to haunt him a bit, and that Christmas morning, Regulus was starting to ruminate on it just a little too much, so he got out of bed and put the thinking behind him. It was a holiday and everyone would be gathering at Grimmauld Place to celebrate. Regulus couldn’t let them see how damaged he still was, how many pieces of himself had yet to fall into place.

The sun was just beginning to rise when he went downstairs and put on the kettle. Not even Kreacher was awake yet. He’d moved back into Grimmauld Place after the Battle of Hogwarts. James had asked him to only an hour after Tom Riddle fell dead in the middle of the Forbidden Forest. Regulus didn’t realize he’d done that until weeks later when he found Kreacher back in his tiny room near the kitchen.

“Mr. James Potter wants Kreacher to take care of Regulus,” Kreacher said with grave certainty. He didn’t listen to Regulus much these days. Since Regulus had freed him, Kreacher had become a lot more like a cantankerous, old friend and less like a servant. Regulus acted annoyed about it, but honestly, he loved the way things had repaired themselves around the pains in their shared past.

To Regulus’s surprise—and Sirius’s—Kreacher’s new favorite was James. Regulus didn’t understand it at first, James was a blood traitor and a werewolf, he lived in the Nobel and Most Ancient House of Black ancestral home, a fact that would have made Regulus’s parents

throw a fit big enough to take out the whole street, yet Kreacher treated him with respect and an unusual deference.

“He just loves you,” James told him the one time Regulus asked. “And he knows I love you, so we get along.”

Regulus wasn't sure if James was being serious or not, but he didn't push.

Grimmauld was quiet at this time of morning, despite the unusually large amount of people who were living there. Regulus had come back to the house right after everything at Hogwarts was dealt with, and he was too exhausted to leave for at least a week, so he recovered in his childhood bedroom. He hadn't thought about where he would live afterward, he hadn't thought he would live at all, so he just stayed in Grimmauld, night after night.

Halfway through his week of recovery, Sirius and Remus moved back in. They'd been helping clean up Hogwarts, and Remus had been dealing with all the werewolves who had been at the battle, but when they finally left, they came to Grimmauld rather than Black manor.

Harry and Draco came too once Lucius and Narcissa were arrested. It seemed like Hogwarts was the waiting grounds for everything that was to come and the four of them had been staying in the castle trying to figure out what the future held. It took four months before the trials began, but Harry and Draco came to live at Grimmauld during that time. Draco said it was because he wanted to be close to the Ministry, but Harry privately told Regulus that Draco felt safer being near Remus and Sirius.

“You're up early,” Sirius said, making Regulus jump slightly. He hadn't heard him coming downstairs or entering the kitchen. Somehow he'd missed him making them both tea as well.

“Yeah,” Regulus said because there was no use in explaining anymore. Sirius understood, he didn't sleep well either.

“Remus kept calling out for some woman in his sleep,” Sirius said instead of asking or commiserating. They were past that by now.

“Oh? Tonks?” Regulus asked just to be a dick.

Sirius soured. “If he calls out for Tonks in his sleep, I'm lighting the bed on fire,” Sirius said. Regulus snickered.

“Try to keep that fire contained, I don't want to have to evacuate the whole neighborhood.”

“No promises,” Sirius muttered.

“So what woman was he calling out for?” Regulus asked.

“I don't know her, but I think she must be a werewolf. She has one of those names, Clea, that sounds like someone who was born into a werewolf pack. I can't remember if Remus mentioned her before, but he sounds so distressed when he says it...”

“Does that upset you?”

“That he sounds distressed?”

“That he’s calling out for another woman,” Regulus clarified.

Sirius tilted his head back and forth. “Yes,” he admitted honestly. “But I’m trying to be reasonable about it. I think if he’d had some lover while I was in Azkaban he would have told me about it by now. I think it’s something more complicated than that.” He took a long gulp of tea. “Though I’d love if I didn’t have to wake up to Remus saying anyone else’s name but mine.”

Regulus frowned. “Are you going to ask him about it?”

“After Christmas,” Sirius said. “I don’t want things to get too heavy today.”

“Me either,” Regulus said with a tired sigh.

“What time is everyone coming over?” Sirius asked.

“Should be around eleven,” Regulus said. “But who knows? You know how Molly loves to show up two hours early, and Bill and Fleur are always late. So are the twins.” He shook his head. “Andromeda and Tonks are coming this afternoon.”

Sirius’s face didn’t turn into a sneer, which Regulus thought was very mature.

“Not sure about the rest. Might just be a day of people coming and going,” Regulus settled on. He didn’t know how his home had become the center meeting place for a major holiday, but he was oddly grateful that he didn’t have to go anywhere. It was easier now that so many people lived there.

It wasn’t only Sirius, Remus, Draco, and Harry living with them. Hermione had moved in as well. She’d gone with Remus to recover her parents but things were still tense between them and Hermione found it more comfortable to live at Grimmauld rather than with them. She saw them every other day, but it was still good for her to have some space.

Luna and her father also lived there, in one of the guest rooms they added to the attic. Xenophilius Lovegood’s house had been destroyed after he called the Death Eaters on Harry Potter—a moment which he’d apologized for enough times to get annoying—so he and his daughter didn’t have a place to live. Regulus had opened his home to them because he knew what it meant to make mistakes and besides, Kreacher liked Luna more than anyone so it seemed fitting.

Crabbe also lived there, though he barely left his room. Since Goyle’s death, he hadn’t been the same. Draco was worried he’d hurt himself, especially after his father was arrested, so Regulus had asked him to come stay so he could have Kreacher keep an eye on the boy. He still seemed too young for Regulus to consider him a man.

There were others that didn’t live there that still frequented Grimmauld enough to make it feel like they did. Ron came over most days, Ginny too, Pansy was constantly visiting Draco,

the twins came often, it was a never ending revolving door of guests.

Regulus didn't mind at all. He didn't like having too much alone time during those first few months, and really, he'd thought it was only *be* a few months. But then September came and went and Hogwarts still hadn't opened, and all his guests remained, a bit uncertain of where to go now.

"Why aren't they opening the school?" Regulus asked Remus only a day into September. He hadn't even thought about it, but all the seventh years had yet to take their N.E.W.T.S.

"There was so much spell damage from the battle," Remus said with a frown, "they're still working on clearing it out. Not to mention that half the professors are refusing to return. Slughorn is going back into retirement, Rolanda is long gone, neither of the Divinations professors want to return. It's a mess."

McGonagall had been declared Headmistress after the battle. Regulus doubted there would be any discussion about Snape returning given his allegiance to Tom Riddle, but he'd taken himself out of the running anyway when he'd left the country two weeks after the Battle of Hogwarts. Before that, he'd been lying in a Hospital Wing bed in the castle recovering from Nagini's attack, but once he was well enough to walk, he was gone.

The Aurors had wanted to arrest him, he was a Death Eater after all, and he'd killed Dumbledore, but they couldn't find him. A few weeks after he left they received several stores of memories supplied by Dumbledore himself before his death that proved Snape's spy status so they decided to call off their search for the man. Regulus didn't have strong feelings about Snape's departure, he only hoped the troubled man found peace. Neville was obviously disappointed, though he was the only one that Snape bothered leaving a note for.

Neville was another person who'd come to live at Grimmauld. He spent a lot of time in the potions lab or traveling to Black Manor, which Regulus opened to him after telling him the full story of his lives and deaths, so that he could maintain the greenhouse there. Regulus didn't know what he was looking for or what he was researching, but he didn't pry. Neville had lost more than most in the war, and Regulus was just happy he could provide a safe home for him now.

It felt wrong that so much was still up in the air so long after Tom Riddle's death. He'd originally thought that life would have settled after everything that happened, but it still seemed like everyone was scrambling to find their footing after so much grief.

Draco was the first person to join them that morning. He looked haggard like he hadn't slept a wink. Sirius, who'd grown very fond of Draco since their time living in Black Manor, got up immediately to make Draco a cup of tea, setting it in front of him at the table and placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Are you planning to visit Azkaban today?" Sirius asked softly.

Lucius had been given ten years for his crimes as a Death Eater. It was a light sentence, mostly due to his turncoat status in the final moments of the war, and it wasn't so bad now that they'd removed all the dementors from the prison, but it was still devastating for Draco

who'd just gained access to a father who knew all of him, including his Veela nature and his love for Harry Potter, and then had that father taken from him. His mother had been given a year. She'd helped them in the end, but she'd still let Tom live in her home. She's still hid Bellatrix after she escaped Azkaban. She wasn't innocent.

Draco was wrecked by the news, but Sirius had managed to soften it a bit. He was Lord Black and that gave him privileges in the Ministry. He'd helped arrange plans for Draco to go and visit them every single week, even scheduling one specifically for Christmas morning. Draco usually went alone, he didn't like people to see him there, but today, Sirius was intent on going with him.

Draco nodded. "In an hour," he said. He glanced up at Sirius hopefully.

"I'll be there," Sirius said, squeezing Draco a bit harder before heading back to his seat. It was a quiet morning, just the three of them, but once noises started sounding from elsewhere in the houses, Regulus knew it was time to get ready for the day.

Draco and Sirius left before anyone else was up while Regulus went up to take a shower so long that his skin started melting off his bones from his overuse of hot water. He was only in the shower for approximately two minutes before he heard the door open and felt a body slide in behind him.

"I woke up and you were gone," James said, his voice scratchy with sleep. He was probably barely awake. James had apparently been a morning person when he was a teenager, but lately, he'd been sleeping later and later. James said it was just so he could stay in bed with Regulus for as long as possible, but Regulus thought his sleep was getting less restful as time went on.

Regulus pressed back against him, feeling the hard length of James dig into his back. He'd gotten a little bit taller after he was bitten by a werewolf, just enough for him to be annoying about it, but it left them misaligned when they wanted to waste some time together in the shower. James grunted, gripping Regulus tightly by his waist. He dug his thumbs into Regulus's back muscles, and Regulus bent forward like he'd been commanded to. James was always clear with what he wanted.

It was odd living with so many people because it made Regulus feel like they were back in school, forced to sneak around so that no one would catch on. Everyone knew they were together now, but that didn't mean he wanted everyone in the house to hear the noises coming out of his mouth as James dropped to his knees behind him and began tonguing Regulus open. He put a hand over his mouth and prayed that the silencing charms he kept around the room held.

Regulus was gasping and shaking, his hands pressed onto the floor to keep from falling forward, by the time James pulled away, slapping his hand against the flesh of Regulus's thigh happily. James stood, placing a hand on Regulus's back as if to keep him where he was and entered him with a low groan.

Despite Regulus's bad arm, the damaged Dark Mark still giving him trouble months after Tom Riddle was gone, he was still able to keep himself steady as James thrust into him

smoothly.

He was different about sex now. Right after he'd been bitten, he was randy all the time, pinning Regulus wherever he could get him and pulling orgasm after orgasm from Regulus until he was so delirious he couldn't form words. He still did that now, especially before and after the full moon, but more often than not, he shagged Regulus with intention, like he was trying to further their emotional bond using his dick.

Regulus was getting close and James must have known it from the way Regulus kept clamping down around him. He pulled Regulus up by the shoulders, kicking his legs open before lifting one to prop his foot up on the side of the tub. After that, Regulus was lost, James working inside of him with a precise snap of his hips until Regulus was painting the shower wall.

He fell back boneless into James's chest, breathing out a sigh of relief.

"You seemed tense," James said, turning Regulus's chin so that he could kiss him deeply, pressing their tongues together like they were preparing for a dance.

"I'm always tense," Regulus said, only half a joke.

James snickered softly. "Yeah, so tense," he said, sticking two fingers inside of Regulus like he was going to press his come as deep as he possibly could. He loved doing that now, keeping some part of him on Regulus, no matter what part it happened to be.

Regulus squeaked and batted James's hand away. "We have a long day," he told him. "If you keep doing that, I won't be able to leave this room."

James laughed but pulled his hand away. They finished showering together in peaceful domesticity, moving around one another with practiced ease. They did this a lot, showered together. It seemed to be the only time they could get where no one would interrupt them.

By the time they left their room, the house was filled with noise, everyone waking slowly and coming downstairs to the breakfast Remus had already started to make. Kreacher still did a lot of the cooking for them, but Remus loved to cook and especially on days when they would have a lot of guests.

Once people began to arrive—Molly first, as Regulus expected—the day flew by. There had been grief and loss and pain during the war, and people seemed to work extra hard to act like they weren't still struggling on days like Christmas. It was almost *too* festive, everyone acting like they were as happy as they'd ever been.

Draco and Sirius returned right after noon, Sirius whispering to Draco quietly while Draco looked pale and worried.

"Is everything okay?" Regulus asked Sirius when he left Draco sitting in a chair near the fireplace in the living room.

"I think so," Sirius said. "I'm just going to get Remus."

“Okay,” Regulus said and tried not to feel hurt that he was no longer the one consulted when something happened with Draco.

It was even worse when shortly after Christmas dinner, which they ate in the early afternoon, Harry asked James if they could talk privately. Regulus tried not to let it get to him, but he couldn’t help feeling a little out of place, like now that the war was over he was no longer necessary, like no one really needed him.

They exchanged gifts in a huge mess of noises and food just before sundown. It was too chaotic to really track who was getting what, but everyone seemed happy enough after the moment was done. Regulus looked around the room feeling overly warm and a little too stuffed full of food. James was sitting with Harry and Ginny, the three of them talking about Quidditch, as usual. Remus and Sirius were “trapped” under a piece of charmed mistletoe and were in the middle of pretending like they’d never kissed before to the entertainment of no one. Hermione and Ron were in the corner, their hands laced together, whispering quietly to each other. Draco was with Pansy and Crabbe up in Crabbe’s bedroom. He didn’t feel up to celebrating Christmas, not that Regulus blamed him.

The only important people missing were Lavender and Parvati who’d gone to visit Parvati’s parents for the Christmas holiday. The rest of them, all the people Regulus had met since he came back to life, were all clustered around the room, locked in games or conversations, all at varying states of drunkenness. Regulus was a bit drunk himself, the firewhiskey he’d been sipping on for the last few hours keeping him going.

“Hey, Regulus,” Harry said suddenly. Regulus hadn’t noticed him leaving the conversation with Ginny and James. The two of them were still talking, both of them getting progressively louder as they argued excitedly.

“Yeah?” Regulus asked just a moment too slowly.

Harry smiled. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Of course,” Regulus said, getting up to follow Harry out of the room and into the library. “What’s going on?”

Harry took a seat at the round table near the window, the same table where the locket had sat so many years ago. Regulus sat down across from him, feeling confused.

“So Draco went to see his mum today,” Harry said slowly, uncertainly.

“I heard,” Regulus said.

Harry’s eyes flicked up to meet his before dropping down to where his hands were tapping nervously against the table.

“Did he tell you what they talked about?” Harry asked. Regulus swallowed harshly.

“No, he hasn’t told me anything.”

“Well,” Harry said, seemingly unable to continue his sentence.

“Harry, is something wrong?” Regulus asked. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” he assured him. Harry cringed slightly.

“No, I have to tell you,” Harry said regretfully.

Regulus’s head was spinning. What could possibly be happening now that would make Harry this upset? And what did it have to do with Draco?

“I—I want to leave,” Harry said finally.

“Sorry?” Regulus asked.

“I want to leave... for a while. I want to, I don’t know, travel, I guess. I don’t want to stay here anymore.”

“Stay here?” Regulus said faintly. “Stay at Grimmauld?”

Harry shook his head. “Stay in England,” Harry clarified and Regulus felt his shoulders drop. “Being here, with the way people treat me and with everything that happened, it just feels like too much sometimes. I keep trying to find a place to go and it seems like everyone is already ready to move on, like by this time next year they’ll all be settled into their lives, but I don’t know what I want to do. Sometimes, I feel like I barely know myself. It’s like I never got the chance.”

“Okay,” Regulus said, trying to wrap his mind around what Harry was saying. “What does this have to do with Draco?”

Harry looked guilty. “Draco didn’t want to go anywhere at first, because of his parents, you know, but when I told him how I was feeling, he said... he said he wants to go with me.”

“Okay,” Regulus said again.

“So he went to talk to his parents today and Narcissa told him to go. Sirius—Sirius is going to take over the visits until she’s out of Azkaban.”

“All right,” Regulus said.

Harry bit down hard on his lip. “Are you mad at me?”

Regulus’s eyebrows flew up. “Mad at you?” he asked, bewildered.

“Yeah,” Harry said sadly. “I know that you, and dad, and Sirius and Remus, all of you did a lot to help me, and I know I’m betraying you—”

“Betraying me?” Regulus gasped.

“I should want to stay here, in the life you guys gave me.”

“Harry,” Regulus shook his head roughly. “We didn’t give you anything. Your life is your own. If you want to travel, then you should do it. You’re not betraying any of us.” Harry still

look uncertain, so he added, “You’re certainly not betraying *me*.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m not even sure how you arrived at the conclusion that I would be upset.”

“You died to keep me safe, you fought Voldemort, you did so much for so many years. I’m probably only alive because of you.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t do that stuff so that I could control you or something,” Regulus said. “I did that stuff because I love you.”

Harry’s eyes opened a little wider. “You love me?”

Regulus felt his cheeks go pink. “Well, yeah, of course,” Regulus said despite his embarrassment. “You’re like—you’ve been like a son to me. I know you have a dad,” he added quickly, “but since I went to Hogwarts to protect you, it always felt like you were a little bit mine.” He didn’t know if he’d ever felt this embarrassed actually. “None of that matters,” he said. “What matters is that you’re happy, and if leaving England and traveling with Draco will make you happy, then I’m in full support.”

He finally shut his mouth, he felt like he’d been rambling a bit. His face burned with humiliation, though he wasn’t sure why. Surely Harry knew how much Regulus loved him, for Merlin’s sake he’d been looking out for the kid for years, but somehow it felt odd to say it out loud.

Harry made a choking sound, drawing Regulus’s attention away from his own emotional state. When Regulus looked up, he found tears running down Harry’s face.

“Oh, Harry,” Regulus said.

“I love you too,” Harry said softly. Regulus got up from his seat, Harry standing as well, just in time for Regulus to wrap him in a hug.

“I could never be angry with you, Harry, or disappointed, or any of that. I promise.”

Harry shook slightly in his arms, but when he pulled back he looked happy. “I’m so relieved,” he said through a watery laugh.

“Is that what you talked to James about earlier?” Regulus asked.

Harry nodded. “I wanted him to know in case you didn’t approve. I figured he could tell me if that was going to happen.”

Regulus laughed softly. “That’s ridiculous,” he said, hugging Harry again. “You’re ridiculous.”

The second Christmas after the war started with a bang. James was having a lovely dream playing Quidditch with the Gryffindors, preparing for their game with Slytherin. James wasn't nervous at all, he would get to see Regulus on the field and that was all he wanted. He was enjoying the feeling of wind in his hair, it was always such a rush.

The bang woke him so abruptly that he let out a shout. He grabbed his wand first—he never slept without it—and then reached over to feel for Regulus. He woke like that at least once a week, though not always because of a nightmare, sometimes it was just the act of waking that put him on edge. That panic had been exhausting and constant right after the war, but early February of 1999, Regulus insisted that he start taking something to help him sleep. Things had mostly improved but it still wasn't perfect. Things were still difficult sometimes.

Like now, when he woke to a sound like an explosion and found that Regulus was missing from the bed. He jumped to his feet, his knees nearly giving out as if they weren't quite awake, and threw on a dressing robe before tossing himself down the stairs toward the noise.

"I told you that wasn't the right ingredient," Harry said roughly, his muffled voice coming from the closed door to the potions lab in the basement.

"I really thought it was," Ron replied sadly.

James relaxed immediately, his chest loosening now that he knew the cause of the noise. "Another failure, I guess," Regulus said, making James jump slightly. He was leaning against the doorframe leading to the kitchen, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked relaxed, and so, so handsome. "They'll have woken the whole house with that one."

James smiled without meaning to and moved so he could pull Regulus into his arms. Regulus came easily, that soft look in his eyes that made James want to throw him over his shoulder and carry him back to bed. They'd been together for nearly two years now, but Regulus always lit up when James did anything romantic as if he was still a little surprised by it. It would have been a bit sad if James didn't love surprising him.

"Why are they practicing potion making on Christmas?" James asked, placing a line of kisses up Regulus's cheek.

"Ron has his exam in three days, if he doesn't pass this one, he won't be allowed to retake it," Regulus said. "Harry agreed to help him study. I *told* them to ask someone more qualified, but I think they just wanted an excuse to spend time together." His eyes sparkled. "But don't tell them I told you that otherwise they'll get embarrassed."

James snickered softly, the noise muffling when Regulus kissed him on the lips. He was always sweetest first thing in the morning, the hard exterior he wore most days was not yet adorned. He was just Regulus.

He heard Ron and Harry starting to talk loudly again in the lab, but it didn't sound like they were arguing angrily, more like they were bickering for fun. It made James laugh a bit. Harry was kind to all his friends, but he had a sarcastic streak a mile wide and Ron seemed to enjoy it the most. James could understand how the two of them had been friends for so long.

Harry had left England in January, only two weeks after Christmas, and Ron had been devastated, though James knew he tried very, very hard not to show it. He was still living with his parents at the time and he'd been under the impression that he and Harry were going to take their N.E.W.T.s together. Ron later told James that he understood why Harry had to leave and that he was happy for his friend, but that he wasn't prepared to spend another year without him.

Harry clearly missed Ron just the same. He wrote more letters to him than he did to James and Regulus combined, updating him on where he and Draco were going and all the weird things he was seeing. More than once Harry had asked Ron to come out and join them, together he and Draco had more than enough money to fund Ron's addition to the trip, but Ron always declined.

In early summer, Hermione decided to go to a muggle university in Scotland. She'd wanted access to a muggle education after so long in the wizarding world and had decided that having both could only aid her when she eventually went to work for the Ministry, as she was planning to do. Unfortunately for Ron, she'd decided to go alone. Completely alone. Without even a boyfriend back home.

The two of them had only officially been together since the Battle of Hogwarts.

If Ron was devastated by Harry leaving, he was destroyed by Hermione going as well. James could still remember when they found out because he was in the middle of cooking an extravagant meal for Regulus for his birthday when Ron came through the floo unannounced. He was partially drunk and inconsolable.

James had done his best to take care of him and when Regulus came home to find a half-cooked dinner and a sobbing Ron Weasley at the kitchen table, he'd sighed like he was the seer of the group and had known this was coming, then flicked his wand to summon a menu for a muggle restaurant they'd begun to frequent on occasion.

Regulus's foray into the muggle world was a strange one in James's opinion, mostly because he'd failed to realize how fascinated Regulus was with muggle culture. They'd started with simple things—restaurants they could walk to, a muggle library that Regulus owed hundreds of pounds in fines to, a park that Regulus had discovered when he was just a little kid—but soon he wanted to venture further and further out.

James was intimidated by it, but he did his best not to show it. He'd barely spent any time in the muggle world and only ever with Lily. Remus had tried a few times but he always just wanted to take them to bars when they were all sixteen and James hadn't been all that interested in such a thing at the time.

When they got a letter from Harry saying he was heading to Kosovo, Regulus asked if James wanted to meet him there and surprise him. They'd yet to travel to meet Harry and Draco, leaving them to their own adventures, but James could never deny Regulus anything, especially when he looked all sparkling and mischievous.

James should have realized the real reason he wanted to go. Not to see Harry, though that was definitely a perk, but to ride on a muggle aeroplane, a contraption that made James sick to his

stomach. He was so terrified of it that he refused to fly back on one and insisted they take a portkey which Regulus allowed with a indulgent smile.

By the time Ron showed up sobbing, Regulus was very comfortable ordering a takeaway.

Regulus forced Ron and James to eat, then he slowly and carefully worked out what had happened to Ron, frowning sympathetically the entire time.

"I thought she loved me," Ron said, sounding so heartbroken that it nearly brought tears to James's eyes.

Regulus didn't seem to have anything to say to that but he made a face like he knew more than he was letting on. When Ron finally passed out, exhausted from crying, Regulus levitated him up to Harry's room and left him to rest. When he came back downstairs, James said, "I'm so sorry, I was trying to do something special for your birthday."

Regulus merely grinned, though he looked a bit worn out. "You can do something special in a week, once I've stopped expecting it again."

James laughed. "Of course," he said, then frowned. "Did you know that Hermione was going to break up with Ron?"

Regulus cringed slightly. "Yes," Regulus confessed. "She told me a couple of days ago. She was just as upset." He shook his head. "I don't understand, but she feels like she needs to do this and I guess she's been having some issues processing the war. It was difficult for her—not being allowed back at Hogwarts because of her blood status, and I think she sort of resents that Ron was allowed to stay, even if it was horrible for him."

"That's tragic," James said. "Poor Hermione. Poor Ron."

"No one can catch a break these days," Regulus said with a tired sigh.

Ron moved in with them after that. Grimmauld was far more empty than it had been only months before. Hermione had moved out in mid-June, already preparing for school, Luna and her father had started rebuilding their home in March and by the summer it was finished enough for them to move in, and Crabbe had gone with Luna.

Sirius, Remus, and Neville were still there in July when Ron joined the household, but James knew they wouldn't be for long.

It had taken them almost a full year to repair Hogwarts. The spell damage and blown up walls were difficult to repair, but more than that, the school's protective magic had darkened after spending so long surrounded by dementors. It made it difficult for them to repair the protective wards and nearly impossible for them to make any restorative construction stick. Hogwarts was almost a magical being in itself and they couldn't just stack stone in a line to create a new wall, Hogwarts had to accept the new piece, it had to allow them to fix it.

It was complicated and they'd had to use a team of cursebreakers to repair it, including Bill Weasley who'd been living in Hogsmeade with his wife while he repaired it.

They'd finally finished the project in May, and McGonagall, the new Headmistress announced that the school would be reopening in September of that year. It was a win for the wizarding community. Hogwarts had been a pillar of protection for many years and when it had fallen into Death Eater hands, it had seemed like all hope was lost. To see it reestablished to its former glory made many people feel a renewed sense of anticipation.

Remus had been invited to return as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, supposedly the position was no longer cursed now that Tom Riddle was dead. James hadn't even realized that was what was going on there. Remus hadn't wanted to take it at first, since Christmas of '98, he'd been having episodes tied to the werewolf packs he'd met years before, and he'd been trying to figure out what was going on. He didn't think it was right to take a professor role when he still didn't know what was happening to him, not to mention that he was still terrified of accidentally transforming without his Wolfsbane like he had last time.

Sirius was the one to convince him. He'd insisted that Remus was always meant to be a professor.

"Besides, I'll be there to make sure you take your Wolfsbane, and we'll still go to the manor for the full moon."

"What about when I'm recovering from the moon? It was so inconvenient last time having to miss classes?" Remus had argued back. It was a weak offense, the full moons were far less damaging to him now that James was with him every time. He never hurt himself and some of his old wounds had even begun to heal slightly. He barely had to use his cane anymore.

"I'll teach for you if you're too tired to do it yourself," Sirius said.

"You'll—"

"Yep," Sirius interrupted. "I already told Minnie about it and she agreed that it's a great decision."

Remus gave Sirius a bemused look. "So you'll just come visit the school when it's your turn to teach?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Sirius said. "I'm going to be working to."

Remus's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"She offered me Hooch's position. Hooch had been wanting to retire, something about an old lover out in Egypt, and after the battle she refused to go back. It's not a very heavy position, just a few flying classes, managing the Quidditch teams, that sort of thing."

"Why didn't either of you tell me this?" Remus asked.

"I asked Minnie not to tell you. I wanted you to agree to teach Defense all on your own." He threw up his hands. "Alas..."

It had been a bit of a silly discussion in James's opinion since Remus was obviously going to say yes eventually and even if he said no, Sirius was probably going to kidnap him and lock

him in the castle until he agreed.

As the school year approached, they decided to buy a house in one of the small wizarding villages north of the castle. Sirius didn't want to live in Hogsmeade, he thought it was too cliché, but they also wanted a place to themselves nearby, a place they could go on the weekends to get away from their jobs.

James had been unusually sad to see them go, crying himself to sleep the night they moved out, but it turned out Sirius and Remus missed him just the same and now he saw them at least once a week for dinner, sometimes more if James was lucky.

Neville had moved out in August. He'd been accepted into a Herbology Mastery program in Germany at the beginning of the summer and when Regulus agreed to make regular visits to Neville's parents at Saint Mungo's, Neville decided to go. He lived with them through the summer, spending nearly every day with them. James cried when he left too, much to Regulus's entertainment.

By Christmas of that year, only James, Regulus, Ron, and Kreacher were living in Grimmauld.

It seemed so quiet after the chaos of the year before, but slowly James had adapted. It was nice to have more time alone with Regulus at least, especially once the new school year started.

Students who had been seventh years during the war were offered the chance to return to Hogwarts to redo their last year and finally take their N.E.W.T.s. Nearly everyone had said yes, only Harry, Hermione, Ron, Draco, Crabbe, and Neville said no. Regulus said no as well, though he hardly needed to repeat his seventh year after completing so much of his schooling twice. For the few students who refused, McGonagall gave them the opportunities to take their N.E.W.T.s in October. Hermione and Regulus had taken and passed all of theirs, Hermione taking a few days off from university so she could finish the exams. Ron had pushed most of his back, opting to take them in January. Neville took them at his new school in Germany. He had such a glowing recommendation from Severus Snape that they barely required them at all.

Harry, Draco, and Crabbe didn't take them at all. Harry said in one of his letters that when he came back—if he came back—he would apply to take them, but for now it wasn't a priority for him. James had wondered if he should try to be a parent and demand that Harry come back and be responsible.

Narcissa had been the one to talk him out of that nonsense. She'd been freed from Azkaban in late July and had stayed at Grimmauld place for two weeks before moving into an apartment in Knockturn Alley. James had told her about how he was feeling with Harry. It was odd given their lack of an age difference and the fact that James hadn't been given the opportunity to raise him. Narcissa, now that she knew the full story, listened without judgment.

When James was finished explaining it to her, she said, "Harry and Draco have grown up with a lot of expectations and their youths were very affected by the war. While they may have

needed restrictions at one point, I don't think it would help them now. They need freedom, to be themselves, to be young and in love.”

"So you think I should let it go?" James asked uncertainly.

"I think you should let it go," Narcissa said, then glanced at one of the moving pictures Draco had sent to her of him and Harry in front of a statue somewhere in France. "That's what I planned to do.”

James was impressed by how well Narcissa handled everything. She looked a bit frail when she first was released from Azkaban but she recovered quickly and with a grace that James thought impossible. The Malfoy family had faced hefty fines because of their part in the war, but after Regulus testified for them, they'd managed to skate by with enough money that they would never have to work again.

Narcissa had used that money to buy her apartment and only a month after she was released, she began visiting her husband once a week with the help of Regulus's ministry connections. James thought she'd be more upset by Draco not being there with her, but she seemed at peace with it.

James spent most of the year helping Ron recover from his brutal breakup and writing letters to his son.

Harry had expressed an interest in traveling the moment James had given him Lily's journal from when they'd lived together. Before she died, she'd spent her time researching places all over the world that she might want to visit. She'd told James that once they were free and once they'd separated, she wanted to take Harry everywhere.

Of course, she'd never gotten that chance, but it seemed to heal a small part of Harry *and* James knowing that he was getting to go to those places anyway, and with someone who loved him so much that he'd literally torn men to shreds with his bare hands.

Regulus had actually worried quite a bit about Draco's ability to travel, being a Veela wasn't easy, but he'd spent his first year after the war learning to control his inheritance, including discovering how to reveal and hide his wings at will.

James loved reading Harry's letters, it was clear that with each passing week, Harry grew a little lighter and a little happier. By the time he was heading back to visit for Christmas, his letters were bordering on mania. He looked so much healthier when he showed up, well rested and well fed. He had scruff on his face that suited him and he wore well-tailored expensive clothes that made him look much older than the last time James had seen him.

His son was a man, and though James had missed most of his life so far, he was ecstatic that he got to see this part.

"How have things been?" Harry asked him, when they finally had a chance to catch up just the two of them.

James updated him on Sirius and Remus first.

"Is Remus still having those dreams?"

James shrugged. "It's hard to tell. He never remembers them when he wakes up, he only knows they're happening when he happens to sleep talk. They've started looking for some of the old packs, but they haven't had much luck. It's—It's not easy, it looks like something terrible happened to a lot of werewolves sometime between the first and second war. A lot of them of them are still missing."

He told him about Narcissa and Lucius, who Draco had gone to see the moment they landed in England, and he told him about Ron and Hermione.

"How is Regulus?"

James grinned, as he always did when Regulus was mentioned. "Better everyday," James said honestly. "Did he mention that he's now head of the family?" Harry nodded, though he looked confused.

"What does that mean?"

"Sirius was head of the family, had been since his mother died, but he never wanted it. He'd spent his entire childhood being groomed for the position and the prospect always made him miserable. Regulus was always much better at those sorts of things—managing the family books and properties, investing the family money, and taking over the Black family Wizengamot seat. So when Sirius knew he was going to Hogwarts, he stepped down. Regulus is legally his son, so he was next in line."

"Wow," Harry said. "He sounded happy about it?" He raised his eyebrow in question as he said it, fishing for information.

"I think he does. He gets to participate in law making and since the war he's had quite a few ideas he's wanted to push."

"Like what?"

"Like elvish welfare," James said. "Though don't mention it to him until after Christmas. He gets very angry when the subject is brought up and I'm trying to keep him from going on any three hour rants until after the holiday."

Harry laughed at that, and when Regulus joined them just a bit later, Harry immediately asked him about elf rights, shooting a mischievous smirk James's way. *That little shit.*

Harry had spent nearly every moment after that with Ron, catching him up on all his travels—despite all the letters—and learning about what Ron had been up to. James overheard one bit of their conversation about Ron's plans after N.E.W.T.s. He'd been planning to go work for the twins, but he wasn't sure it was right for him.

"They already hired Theo, the Slytherin guy, I can't remember if I told you that. They said there is always a place for me there, but I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I want to do that just because it's available."

"I get it," Harry said. "What else interests you?"

James purposefully tuned them out after that, giving Ron some privacy to speak with his friend. When he was ready to tell James and Regulus about his plans, he would.

"They're so responsible now," James said, nodding to the potions lab where Ron and Harry were practicing together. "I'm surprised Draco isn't with them. Didn't you say he loved potions?"

"He does," Regulus said. "I think he's still sleeping though. Harry said that he's not a morning person."

"So it's just us awake then?" James asked, lowering his voice to a whisper. Regulus raised one eyebrow.

"Why do you ask?" Regulus drawled, which meant yes. Sirius and Remus were staying with them for the holiday, as was Narcissa, but if no one else was up, then that meant James still had some time to steal Regulus away.

He moved quickly, throwing Regulus over his shoulder, as he'd wanted to a moment before, and sprinted back up the stairs, running on his toes to keep from making too much noise. Regulus laughed breathlessly, huffing a gasp when James threw him down on their bed and yanked his pajama bottoms off.

It was only two days after the full moon and James was hard as a rock, probably had been since he was rudely awoken that morning. He pressed Regulus's legs back and opened him with his fingers, relishing in his warmth. Regulus's mouth hung open delectably as James pressed inside him, burying his cock until he didn't know where he ended and Regulus began.

"I love you," he whispered. Regulus grinned.

"You always say that."

When they were finished, curled in bed as the sounds of the people waking elsewhere in the house started to filter in, James felt something settle on his chest, something he'd been trying to avoid all year. He didn't want to deal with it today of all days, but then he looked down at Regulus and saw a matching troubled expression on his handsome face.

"What are you worrying about?" James asked. Regulus glanced up at him.

"You tell me first," Regulus said. James should have known he couldn't hide from Regulus.

He sighed, fortifying himself. "I want to break into the Department of Mysteries. I can't stop thinking about it. Kevalin is probably still down there and the werewolf woman... if she's still alive."

Regulus was quiet for a moment, then he said, "I want to pay for Barty to have an official tombstone." He swallowed harshly. "I know he wasn't a good man in the end, but I still want to take care of it. No one else was alive in his family to do it for him."

Two confessions, perhaps not of equal weight or difficulty, but when James eyes met Regulus, he knew that this was what a partnership meant. Supporting the other one through something horrible, something scary, something difficult.

“All right,” James said.

Regulus looked relieved. “All right.”

2000

Remus would love to say that he was excited to wake up in Grimmauld Place on Christmas morning, but that would be a bold-faced lie. It was the day of the new moon and Remus should have been feeling his best, he had time off from teaching, and he was about to spend the day eating too much food and getting comfortably buzzed with everyone. It should have been perfect.

There was just one issue.

Since the beginning of the year, Sirius and Regulus had started fighting. *Really* fighting.

Remus thought it was because of the awkward Black family dinners that had begun shortly after the Christmas of '99, when Sirius was all but forced to attend meals with Regulus, Narcissa, Andromeda, and Dora. Narcissa and Andromeda had connected after Narcissa was freed from Azkaban, and though their relationship wasn't perfect, Narcissa seeking her sister out with an apology on her lips had been enough for them to start speaking again.

Remus wasn't sure whose idea the dinners were but Regulus informed Sirius that he should come because it would be rude not to and Sirius had agreed though he was clearly still struggling to spend time with Dora once a month, especially since James and Dora had started spending more time together, their friendship blossoming since the end of the war.

The fights started somewhere in February or March, Remus couldn't remember exactly, but one evening he and Sirius had gone over to Grimmauld to spend the evening with Regulus and James, and by the end of it, Regulus and Sirius were arguing viciously, their teeth bared like they were animals.

James and Remus were too shocked to do much of anything that night, just staring at each other helplessly, but by the next week, when it happened again, they started trying to intervene.

The fights got nasty quickly.

More than once the fights had ended because Sirius started throwing hexes and Remus had to drag him through the floo to keep him from doing any real damage. They would both end up saying things that Remus thought were unforgivable.

“This is why mother never loved you,” Regulus said one time.

“Regulus,” James chastised, looking horrified.

"She only loved you because you were too pathetic to fight back," Sirius spat back.

"Sirius, please," Remus begged.

At one point, James and Remus agreed to keep the brothers separated. Neither Regulus or Sirius seemed inclined to stop spending time together. Remus didn't know if both of them were too proud to fold first, but he decided he and James needed to take control. That plan only made things worse. Sirius and Regulus both grew bitter and angry when they spent too long away from each other like little children sulking because they'd been denied something sweet.

So they brought the brothers back together and endured the fighting.

A few weeks before Christmas, Remus woke from the full moon to find Regulus and Sirius fist fighting right next to him. That fight ended in a lot of hair pulling and scratching, which was a bit pathetic, but at the time it seemed very distressing to Remus.

He hated to think what Christmas was going to be like now that Sirius and Regulus had to be together all day.

That wasn't the only reason things were tense in Grimmauld. Hermione was coming back to visit, meaning she'd have to spend time with Ron. Remus had heard the whole saga and was curious to see what happened, especially because he knew Ron was now dating Theo Nott, the Slytherin wizard who ran the Hogsmeade version of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. The twins had opened it only a week after Zonko's closed. Remus had spent the last three months confiscating their products from his students.

Ron's relationship with Theo was a bit of a shock to all of them, but according to Regulus, Ron had asked at dinner one night how Regulus and James knew they were gay.

"I had no idea," James had told him. "Never even suspected until I couldn't stop following Regulus around. I think it took a dream for me to realize I felt that way."

"I think I always knew," Regulus answered. "I never had any interest in girls, but anytime I imagined marrying someone, it was always a man. Before I went to Hogwarts, I thought maybe I just wanted to marry one of my friends."

"I guess it's different for everyone," James said honestly.

Two weeks later, Ron brought Theo home to meet Regulus and James officially, announcing that they were now dating. He'd dated periodically since his breakup with Hermione but nothing had stuck until Theo. Remus didn't know if Hermione knew about Theo, nor did he know if she would care, but he had to admit he was curious.

Remus looked over at Sirius and wondered how he would feel watching him date someone else. Even the thought of it made his chest hurt. To sooth himself he twisted over in bed, covering Sirius's sleeping body with his own, and started nipping at his neck and shoulder. Sirius woke with a soft moan and pressed his hips back, grinding into Remus's length.

It was nice on the new moon. He knew in a few days he'd start obsessing about some new project he needed to complete on their home, but for now, he felt like a regular man. He fucked his husband like a regular man, that was for sure, working him over until Sirius was shaking and desperate.

Once they left their room, ready to start their Christmas, Regulus and James were already up and moving about the kitchen. James was making breakfast shirtless, which Remus very much didn't need to see, and Regulus was leaning against the counter admiring him.

"Happy Christmas," Sirius mumbled as they entered. "Prongs, please put on a shirt."

"Don't listen to him," Regulus said immediately. Sirius scowled and Remus's shoulders climbed up toward his ears.

As much as Remus didn't want to watch Regulus and James ogle each other, he was glad that they seemed back to normal. It had been a stressful year for them. In January, Regulus had surprised everyone by paying to have Barty's body moved from an unmarked grave made by the Ministry into a cemetery near Grimmauld Place. Sirius had been furious, and James was clearly struggling with it as well, but Regulus held firm.

"He was my friend once," was all Regulus would say.

In February, Regulus and James had nearly been charged with a crime after they broke into the Department of Mysteries. Sirius had to leave Hogwarts for three weeks to handle the issue, paying several barristers to get them free. Apparently, James had gone back to free the werewolf he'd met there.

"She was gone," James said, obviously wrecked by the news. "So was that asshole, Kevalin. They said he'd been fired when I asked but I found the notes about him. They said 'dismantled.'" He lifted his fingers to do air quotes at that.

"We found information on Tom though," Regulus said, clearly trying to soften the blow. James had given him a grateful smile though it was clear it didn't solve his heartache.

"Tom was the other man there with you?" Sirius asked gently. James nodded.

"I found his real name," James said.

He heard about what happened later, that James had gone searching for him, even hiring a muggle private investigator to find his family. It took four months but once he did, he was able to meet his son, now a grown man, and tell him that his father never abandoned him, that he loved him. It was a weight off of James, Remus could see that, but it wasn't exactly easy.

Remus's own search for the werewolves wasn't going much better than James's had. He was looking for Clea, a woman he'd met sometimes during the first war. He'd thought she'd just moved on, but once he started calling her name in his sleep—he was so lucky Sirius didn't leave him over that—he discovered that she'd gone missing during a full moon. And not just her either, an entire pack went missing with her. It had been happening for years, small packs

of werewolves vanishing during full moons. Remus had started a search for them before starting at Hogwarts, but he'd yet to have any luck.

There were other things that made it a heavy year for Regulus and James, though they weren't all bad. Some of them were melancholy or ridiculous or just pure ambition put into practice.

They'd started going together to leave flowers at the graves of people they'd lost. Remus was surprised to hear that Regulus suggested Lily first, especially given everything he'd gone through, but James seemed so relieved that Remus thought he could understand Regulus's motivation.

After Lily, they moved onto Evan Rosier, a Death Eater Mad-Eye Moody had killed in the first war. He'd been a friend of Regulus's. They also went to visit Pandora's grave, a small tombstone right under a massive tree on Xenophilius's property.

It was hard for them, Remus thought, but they always came back a little lighter.

Alexander, a young French man who'd attended Beauxbatons during the Triwizard Tournament also came to live in England that year. He'd gotten a job at the Department of Magical Games and Sports at the Ministry. Remus barely remembered it, but apparently he and Regulus attended the Yule Ball together. Remus knew now of course because James had complained about it for *weeks* after Alexander reached out to Regulus and asked if they could continue their friendship.

Regulus agreed. Remus thought he just didn't know how much it was affecting James at first, but one night Remus had the misfortune of overhearing Regulus *taunt* James with information about the lunch he and Alexander had the week before. James had lost his cool faster than Remus would have thought possible and Remus barely had time to floo home before the noises started. He went home grateful that he was dating Sirius and *not* Regulus. He wasn't sure he could handle that level of jealousy dangled in front of him.

He thought Regulus was a bit insane, actually, but he had to admit that he'd grown to truly like and respect the man. They spent a lot more time together since the war ended, often visiting Black Manor and taking care of the Greenhouse together now that Neville had left for Germany. Regulus was funny and cutting in a way that always made Remus wheeze with laughter.

Regulus was also deeply, deeply caring. Remus had always sort of known that but it was different seeing it first hand. Since taking over as head of the Black family, he'd begun campaigning for elvish welfare and werewolf rights.

"Dobby has been a massive help drafting everything for the elves. He knows what he wants and he's always good at getting input from the other elves," Regulus told him.

Those weren't the only two issues he cared about. He'd become very infatuated with muggle rights, reading countless books on the subject that Hermione sent him.

“They’re a nice break from the romance novels James and I have to read for our weekly bookclub meetings with Cho, Lavender, Parvati, and Padma,” Regulus said, shaking his head like that sentence didn't sound completely barmy. “I like nonfiction, I never thought I would.”

He’d already started making plans for his next improvements to the wizarding world that he would focus on after he passed his changes for elves, but it wasn’t just through the Ministry that he wanted to make changes.

"Did you know that James used to want to be a teacher to young kids?"

Remus gazed at him questioningly. They were walking the grounds of Hogwarts. Regulus came to visit periodically to talk to Professor Burbage.

“No, I don't think so,” Remus said. “I thought he wanted to be an Auror.”

“He said he didn't think he was well suited for it,” Regulus said with a tiny, private smile. “Before he died, he decided that he wanted to teach kids before they went to Hogwarts.”

He didn’t add anything else, but Remus could see the wheels in his head turning.

“Yeah?” Remus asked after a long moment of silence.

“It's a shame that muggleborns are so disadvantaged when they go to Hogwarts, and not just them, their families too. I think there would be less of a divide if muggleborns could start earlier and if wizard kids could meet people who are different than them before Hogwarts.”

Remus smiled. “Yeah, that would be amazing,” Remus said.

Nothing had come of it yet, but he knew well enough now that once Regulus set his mind to something, he could not be stopped.

Ron, Harry, and Draco joined them in the kitchen only a few minutes after Sirius and Remus came down from their room. Both Harry and Draco were tanned from their travels, making Ron look paler than he already was. Harry and Draco had been somewhere in Brazil only a week earlier, visiting with none other than Severus Snape.

“He’s got a little potion shop there,” Harry told them. “He speaks like four languages and he's married to a muggle woman.”

“A muggle?” James asked, his mouth dropping open.

“Yeah,” Draco said. “Her name is Megan. She's actually very friendly.”

Ron, Draco, and Harry crowded around the kitchen table, falling into their seats as they all sleepily rubbed their eyes.

“When is Theo coming over?” Draco asked Ron. Remus still thought it was interesting to watch Draco and Ron be so cordial with each other. He was sure it was for Harry’s benefit.

“In a few hours,” Ron said. “I think he's having breakfast with Blaise.”

“Oh, that's right.”

“You didn't want to go to breakfast with Blaise?” Harry asked Draco.

Draco scowled. "And listen to Blaise complain about *another* girl who broke his heart? Merlin, no. I hear about it enough in his letters.”

Harry laughed. “We can invite him over here if you'd like?”

Draco's eyes lit up though Remus noticed he was trying very hard to hide it. “Okay, I'd like that.”

By the time everyone was over for the holiday, the living room was so stuffed that people were spilling out into the hallway. Ginny had brought her entire Quidditch team, she'd been drafted onto the Holyhead Harpies a few months before and she was clearly keen to show off. Remus couldn't be sure, but he thought he noticed Pansy Parkinson rolling her eyes at the girls, throwing hurt looks at Ginny periodically.

Seamus and Dean were also there, both of them with their girlfriends, though they seemed to be more interested in sharing facts about their girlfriends to one another as if trying to one up each other. By the end of the night, both of the women looked like they were very much over the day. Luna was there with her father, Crabbe joining them. The two of them had been close friends since the final battle.

It was entertaining until Remus went to the kitchen to get another piece of pie and found Sirius and Regulus locked in another one of their fights. He was tired by that point of the day, and he was sick of watching them do this.

“Will you both quit it? You're supposed to love each other. You fought an entire war together. Why are you acting like this?” Remus yelled, louder than he'd meant to.

“Ugh,” Sirius said. “Don't say things like that.”

“Like what?” Remus yelled.

Regulus rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “Okay, Lupin,” he drawled. “I love him very much, does that help?”

“No! Why are you saying it like that?”

“Like what?” Regulus asked, speaking like Remus was a moron.

“Like you hate him! He killed Bellatrix because you died. Doesn't that at least mean something to you?” Remus felt flustered as he finished speaking. Regulus and Sirius shared a look before bursting out laughing.

They left the room, both joyfully mocking Remus, leaving him feeling confused and lost. A few seconds later, Ron entered the kitchen, seemingly also going for pie.

“You okay?” Ron asked when he spotted Remus.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Remus said quickly. “Sorry, Sirius and Regulus were—”

“Ah, they were fighting again,” Ron said knowingly.

“Yes! Why are they doing that?” Remus asked against his will. He was just at a loss.

“I think it's ‘cause they spent so long hating each other and then so long worried about losing each other. Now that they're safe, they can finally act like normal brothers,” Ron said with a shrug before grabbing two slices of pie and leaving the kitchen with a little wave.

It hadn’t occurred to Remus, he was an only child, as was James, but when he rejoined the party a bit later, he noticed Regulus and Sirius joking with Harry, both of them working together to mock Harry for something or other, Harry red-faced and embarrassed. He noticed, just for a second, Regulus and Sirius shared a conspiratorial look before going back to what they were doing.

It hadn’t made sense before, but now that he was looking, he could see the love between them.

2001

Christmas of 2001 was quieter than the past years. It was also the first one Regulus and James spent living in Black Manor. They’d planned to buy property to open the school they'd been working on for months and months, but they couldn't find anything they liked and the school required so many protective wards that they had to be very particular.

After spending so long searching, they realized that there were only two options and though Grimmauld Place had been Regulus’s home for so, so long, and through so many parts of his life, he realized that he liked Black Manor more. It was more spacious and there was a lot more room to gather if they ever wanted people to come stay with them. Plus Regulus couldn’t help looking at the ballroom every time he went, imagining the grand parties he could through there. He hadn’t been into formal parties a child, but now, as an adult, his feeling were changing.

They’d fully remodeled Grimmauld to prepare it to work as a day school, adding entrances on the street for muggle parents to bring their kids. They would be accepting children as young as five, muggleborns and otherwise. They had also created a program for the muggleborn children’s parents so that they could learn about the world they were now connected to.

It was a massive project and Regulus was sure it would take years for them to build it into what they wanted it to be, but it was a start. They planned to open in January of 2002, only a month away.

Regulus woke to an empty bed, something that was becoming more and more common as they prepared to open their school. James had said a few months prior that he needed to get used to it if he was going to be teaching early in the morning. Regulus was touched by that until the first time James tried to wake him at five in the morning. Regulus had flung a

stinging hex at him so fast that he barely noticed what he was doing, acting while he was still asleep. James didn't try that again.

He took a moment to appreciate the sunlight streaming in through the window. They were lucky it wasn't raining or snowing given the time of year. Regulus knew it would still be cold outside, but the sun was still a nice break. He lifted his damaged arm to inspect it, as he did every morning. He'd been going to a healer for it for years. She'd managed to make it look less like a sunken in scar, which was good because after the war the appearance of it was starting to make him feel sick, but he could still see the affects of the curse, especially on the days when his fingers wouldn't move. Today, he was able to clench them into a fist. That was a good sign.

It didn't take him long to find James once he got out of bed, he was in the greenhouse, the warmest room in the house, filled to the brim with magical plants. He was sitting in one of the chairs Regulus had purchased for the room, his hands resting on his knees and his eyes closed. He'd been doing this a lot lately, mediating on the magic inside him.

Regulus snuck in quietly, sure that James would have already heard him coming with his werewolf hearing, but still intent of being stealthy for a moment. He lowered himself to the ground, kneeling between James's slightly spread legs. He glanced up at the man, his face was still completely blank, then he reached out and placed a hand against his cock.

James jumped slightly, reaching out to grab him as his eyes flew open, but there was already a grin on his face.

"You scared me!" James said with a laugh.

"Sorry," Regulus said, sounding anything but.

James's smile stretched even wider. "Well, as long as you're down there."

Regulus grinned lecherously and licked his lips as James pulled his joggers down his hips. They'd been together for years now, but somehow this never got old. It felt so scandalous to do it out in the open like this, but they lived alone now, and though Regulus was sad when Ron finally moved out, renting an apartment near the Ministry, he was still intent on taking full advantage of having James all to himself.

Once they were done, Regulus was panting and desperately hard, but when he tried to reach for his cock, James batted his hand away and refused to let him do anything to relieve the desperation he was feeling. James just grinned that evil grin of his, his eyes narrowed dangerously, and Regulus let him because he loved when James let out the pieces of himself that no one else got to see.

"How are your meditations going?" Regulus asked a bit later when they began making Christmas dinner, Kreacher apparating around the kitchen to help them.

"It's going well," James said but there was a worried line between his eyebrows. Regulus didn't push, he knew James had to work this out on his own.

About half an hour into cooking, people began to show up. Draco and Harry were first, Narcissa and Andromeda coming through with them, both sisters laughing quietly. Harry and Draco had still been traveling all year and though Regulus was always happy to see Harry happy, he had to admit that he wished they'd come home. He wanted to see Harry every day, or at least once a week. He was tired of only seeing him a few times a year.

Sirius came over with Neville and Hermione. Neville had gotten his Herbology *and* Potions mastery over the summer and was immediately offered the position of Herbology professor at Hogwarts. Sprout was itching to move onto something greater and she was glad to be done with it. Sirius said Neville was a natural, that he fell right into the roll like it was made for him.

"The kids love him," Sirius said. "They're always talking about how cool his scars are. Of course, I mentioned him killing that giant snake and that definitely helped."

Regulus had to agree with the kids, Neville did look quite cool with the scar running down his cheek. He'd grown into his awkward teenage body over the last few years as well and now stood a head taller than most of the people they knew. His broad shoulders made him look like a force to be reckoned with.

"Where is Remus?" James asked.

"He'll be along," Sirius said. "He got a call this morning about his search. I was going to go with him, but honestly I don't see this going very far either. We've been hitting a lot of dead ends."

"I'm sorry," James said earnestly.

Regulus was glad to see Hermione in the group again. She'd graduated from her muggle university program in the summer and invited Regulus and James to join her parents at the ceremony—James loved Hermione's parents, he couldn't believe they hadn't met yet, but after that day, he visited them at least once every two weeks. Shortly after graduating, she'd taken a job at the Ministry working for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. It wasn't where she wanted to stay forever, she had high ambitions, but it was a start.

However, since taking her job, she'd barely visited. Regulus thought it had something to do with the fact that Ron was always coming over to see them and Hermione was carefully avoiding him.

At the end of August, after she'd taken the job, she'd gone to Ron and asked to get back together. He and Theo had ended things by then, amicably, thankfully, and Ron was finally single. When Regulus heard about Hermione going to talk to Ron, she'd thought Ron would be relieved and happy to get back together, but instead, he told her no, that he deserved to be with someone that really wanted him and didn't just end up back with him because it was comfortable.

"I don't know what to do," Hermione said. "I really do love him."

"I know you do," Regulus told her. It was well after Christmas dinner by the time they got a chance to talk, but Regulus was just relieved to hear from her after barely seeing her for so many years. "But you really broke Ron's heart when you left like that."

Hermione made a distressed noise and Regulus decided to change tactics.

"You know, I don't think you did anything wrong ending things with him. You needed a chance to be on your own and to work through everything that happened to you, but don't you think Ron deserves that same chance now? None of this has been easy on him."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," she said with a frown. Regulus put a comforting arm around her.

"I think what you need to do is focus on being Ron's friend again, rather than his girlfriend. That's how things worked out before, isn't it?"

Hermione smiled sadly but nodded finally. "That's a good idea."

"I'm really glad you're back," Regulus told her honestly. The smile she gave him then was genuinely happy.

Hermione stayed at Black Manor late into the evening, as did everyone else. Parvati and Lavender were spinning around dancing by the time Regulus returned to the living room. They'd gotten married earlier that year, Lavender demanding that Regulus be her maid of honor during the ceremony, a position he filled with pride. Their wedding was nearly a two week long celebration considering they decided to have an English muggle wedding, an Indian wedding, and a wizarding wedding all back to back. It was quite a show. Parvati and Padma ran a gossip magazine now, so they made sure to publish as many photos of the ceremonies as possible.

"We're helping people by showing them parties thrown by witches with good taste," Lavender told him. She worked for the Ministry, though he wasn't sure which part. She said it was a boring desk job and seemed more than happy not to talk about it, so Regulus didn't pry.

Seamus and Dean were in a loud conversation with Neville. They'd spent the year dating various witches only for them to have a blowout fight and get together in the middle of the summer. Regulus was a bit relieved. He didn't follow their drama very closely but he was starting to think that if things didn't work out, someone was going to end up murdered.

Crabbe and Luna were there with some of the other Slytherins. Crabbe looked better than he had in years. He and Luna had been traveling the world looking for magical creatures to publish stories about. They'd amassed quite a following through her father's magazine.

The Weasleys were all crowded in the room, Ginny glaring at Pansy who appeared to be ignoring her, and Arthur asking Harry and Draco detailed questions about their travels. He'd left the Ministry that year, going to work a muggle corner store after Hermione's father mentioned that he didn't *have* to work with wizards.

Arthur loved it, he looked happier than he had in years.

Bill and Fleur were there with their Victoire, their daughter who'd been born the year before. She was an angel, clearly taking after her gorgeous mother. Charlie was smiling at them, hand in hand with Tonks. Apparently they'd dated at Hogwarts and had recently rekindled their romance. Sirius said he didn't know if it would last, but Regulus thought he might just be a jealous little baby.

Fred and George were joking with their mother and Theo. They were about to take their shop international, opening their first on the United States in only a few months.

It was an exciting night for each of them and Regulus found himself comforted to be surrounded by so many friends.

"Hey," James said quietly. "Take a walk with me?"

"Okay," Regulus said, burning with firewhiskey and happiness. He followed James out into the clear night, shivering slightly against the cold. James kissed him and then led him out toward the cliffs. "You're not going to throw me off, are you?"

"If I was going to murder you, I wouldn't do it while everyone who loves you was right inside," James said.

Regulus laughed, blushing slightly at the way James had phrased his sentence.

"Then what is it?" Regulus asked.

"I wanted to show you something," James said, kissing Regulus again before pulling away.

"All right," Regulus said slowly. The wind blew through his hair, piercing his skin and making him shiver, but he barely noticed, because in front of him James closed his eyes and a moment later, he was replaced by a massive stag. Regulus gasped. "Prongs?"

The stag bumped him with his nose. Regulus tossed his head back and laughed.

"Oh, Merlin, you figured it out!" he yelled.

James made a very strange deer sound that Regulus interpreted as him being happy. Regulus grabbed Prongs' antlers and felt another laugh bubble up.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Regulus asked

James bumped him again.

"Now, I can finally eat you."

James froze, then took two steps back as Regulus transformed into a bear. They didn't go back inside for nearly an hour, sprinting around the grounds, playing like two little kids.

Sirius wrote a letter to Harry telling him that they didn't need to come for Christmas that year. Narcissa was thinking about meeting up with them in Switzerland, Harry and Draco had been staying there for nearly two months, and Sirius knew they were enjoying themselves. He didn't want to bring them down with how poorly things were going in England.

It was the worst Christmas Sirius had since the one where his mother locked Regulus in his room for speaking out of turn and Sirius couldn't do anything except listen to his brother cry from outside the door, knowing he was aching with starvation and rejection.

There were parallels of that Christmas to this one if he searched for them, but he didn't like to search for them. It was easier not to.

In March of 2002, Remus finally caught a break in his search for the other werewolves, a trail that led him to Ireland where he found several diaries hidden in a cabin built right on the western coast. Remus had found it because of rumors about a man who'd once used it as a way station when coming to find werewolves in the area. The cabin looked like it had been abandoned for a few years when Sirius and Remus went down to check it out, but the diaries hidden under the floorboards gave them their next clue.

It was complicated, a trail so thick with secrets that Sirius figured it would never be solved. He kept wanting to go to someone more prepared for such a search, but things were still complicated with the werewolves and the Ministry. Regulus had been pushing for reformation of werewolf laws for years, but he was still met with enough opposition to make it extremely difficult.

People's minds weren't easily changed, and when someone leaked to the press that many werewolves had fought with Voldemort up until the final battle, public opinion shifted even further away from what they wanted.

So Remus was left alone in his search, only Sirius, James, and Regulus there to help him.

About two months after he found the diaries, he discovered the name of a man that lived in Peru, one who claimed to be able to change werewolves, to heal them. Remus was worried he was connected to whatever was happening to the werewolves in England, but there was no way of knowing without going there.

He asked around with some of the packs he knew and learned that only werewolves could visit the man, that he lived in a village so deep in the mountains that it was impossible to find by anyone that didn't have lycanthropy in their blood.

"I think I have to go," Remus told Sirius one night while they were having dinner. Sirius had been expecting it. It was like the first war all over again, Remus being called away to something important and Sirius being left behind. Only this time, Remus wasn't distant and secretive. He got up from his seat, pulled Sirius's away from the table, and knelt in front of him, grabbing his hands.

“Change me,” Sirius begged, unaware that there were tears in his eyes. “Bite me on the next full moon and let me go with you.”

Remus smiled sadly and kissed him. “I would never forgive myself for doing that,” Remus said. “But I won't go, if you don't want me to. I'll stay. I'll give up this search.”

Sirius almost wanted to take him up on his offer, but when he looked into Remus's warm, kind eyes he knew he couldn't. His husband had spent years trying to find answers, and Sirius couldn't deny him this. He kissed Remus hard on the mouth and then threw himself at the man, begging against Remus's lips to be taken to bed. Remus did and when they were finished, Sirius finally spoke.

“You can't go alone.”

Remus was quiet for a long time. “There is only one person I would trust enough to go with me.”

Sirius's eyebrows furrowed in confusion before understanding settled over him. “Regulus isn't going to like it.”

Sirius was right. Regulus didn't like it. But he understood. James would do anything for his friends and Remus was asking for his help. It was in James's nature to say yes, to help in any way he could. Regulus was stiff and devoid of emotion when he said it was a good idea to take James. When Remus asked if Regulus was okay with it, Regulus only nodded and left the room. He looked shell shocked like he had when he was a kid and had just been told he couldn't leave the house for a week because his mother didn't want to have to watch out for him.

James and Remus left in June, right after the end of term, and Sirius managed to stay in the house he shared with his husband for an entire week before he couldn't stand it. He flooded to Black Manor and went searching for his brother, finding the house eerily silent as if it had been abandoned for years.

He found Regulus inside the closet James used. It was big enough to fit a full sized bed, but it was filled to the brim with clothing Regulus had purchased for James over the years. He was standing in the center of the room, his hands clasped behind his straight back, his muscles incredibly tense.

“Regulus?”

“Hm?” Regulus responded.

“What are you doing?” Sirius asked, though after a second, he knew. The smell of James filled the room, the subtly of it hanging to James's clothing. Sirius had been sleeping—or trying to sleep—on Remus's pillow for the last week just so he could get a whiff of his comforting scent. It seemed he and his brother weren't that different. “Have you eaten?”

“When?” Regulus asked.

“Today,” Sirius said.

Regulus seemed to think about it, but when his silence went on for too long, Sirius had his answer.

He dragged his brother from the closet and asked Kreacher to make them some food. The next day, he moved into Black Manor. He couldn't stand to be at home without Remus and he was pretty sure his brother would fall apart if he wasn't there to take care of him. Both of them were affected by Remus and James's absence, but Regulus seemed to be taking it much more personally.

Sirius didn't understand why at first, not until Remus and James had been gone for a full month and Regulus finally confessed.

“It's my own fault,” he told Sirius.

“What is?” Sirius asked. They were playing chess, or at least pretending to, so Sirius wasn't quite following.

“If something happens to either of them, it'll be my fault,” Regulus rephrased.

Sirius frowned. “How?”

“Because I haven't done enough to change the laws. I've been wasting time.”

“How have you possibly been wasting time?” Sirius asked incredulously.

“I spend a lot of time with James. We're not doing anything important, just spending time together. I could have spent that time at the Ministry. I could have worked harder.”

“Regulus, that's ridiculous.”

“No, it's not,” Regulus said harshly, anger on his teeth like blood after a fight, but it quickly turned to sadness. He leaned back in his chair, gazing hopelessly at the ceiling.

“Is this why you agreed to let James go so quickly?” Sirius asked. He'd always been curious, it never seemed like Regulus had a single complaint about the situation. Even after Remus and James were gone, Regulus still was disturbingly quiet on the subject.

Regulus nodded jerkily. Sirius blew out a long breath.

“I wish you'd stop punishing yourself for existing,” Sirius said.

Regulus lifted his head to give him a confused look.

“There is nothing wrong with spending time with James. You could spend all your time with him and it still wouldn't be a waste. But even that's not the case. What about your school? What about the changes you've already made?”

“I still feel useless,” Regulus whispered.

Sirius's chest ached. "I know," Sirius said, because he understood the feeling. "But you're not and I wish you would stop treating yourself like you are."

Regulus stopped sleeping in the bed he'd shared with James only a few days after Sirius moved into the manor, and by September, both of them were sleeping in the living room, stretched out on opposite couches in front of the fire.

School started back up and Remus and James were still gone. Sirius went back to Hogwarts, taking over Remus's defense classes using the detailed notes Remus always kept. It was a lot of work, managing that and all of his flying professor duties, but Sirius did it because Remus would have been horrified to come back and find that his students had fallen behind. Regulus went back to handling things at the school James had started. Regulus wasn't a teacher, not for the students at least, so he was forced to hire someone to take James's place for the time being.

Sirius could see the way the prospect was weighing on him, but it got easier when Hermione stepped in to help.

"What about your job at the Ministry?" Regulus had asked her when she offered to take over the position.

"It wasn't exactly what I wanted," Hermione said vaguely. "I can always go back. I think I just need a little time first."

Regulus seemed conflicted but in the end, he agreed to accept Hermione's help. It was a weight off of Sirius's shoulders to know Regulus wasn't completely alone.

Despite teaching at Hogwarts, Sirius still lived at Black Manor. It wasn't exactly the norm for professors, but every single night, when Sirius went back to his office, he would floo back to Black Manor and stay there. He hated leaving Regulus alone and he couldn't sleep when he was by himself, so it was the only option.

Things got worse in October when Ron went missing.

Regulus and Sirius didn't notice at first. Ron was busy most of the time, working with Fred and George, but he still made an effort to see Regulus at least once a week. After he didn't show up for three weeks, Regulus began to grow worried. It was even worse when they asked the twins if they'd talked to him and learned that Ron hadn't been working for them at all. More than that, they hadn't seen him in over a month.

Neither Regulus nor Sirius had the time to search for him, but they tried their best. By the end of November, they were pulling apart at the seams. James and Remus were still gone and Ron was still missing.

Hence, Sirius's letter to Harry about staying in Switzerland. Harry agreed to do so, but he demanded to be kept updated on the search for Ron.

About a week before Christmas, Lavender came over looking guilty and upset. Regulus was distressed, already pulled taught with how hard the year had been on him. It took nearly an

hour for Lavender to tell them why she was there.

“I don’t work a boring desk job at the Ministry,” Lavender said. She was struggling to speak as if she would be sick at any moment. She kept having to stop and restart her sentences as if she couldn’t quite get them right. It took Sirius far too long to understand what was going on.

“Are you under a Tongue-Tie Curse?” Sirius asked.

Lavender didn’t answer, likely *couldn't* answer, but she looked so relieved that Sirius knew he was right.

“Who put a Tongue-Tie Curse on you?” Regulus asked sharply.

Lavender looked torn.

“Was it your job?” Sirius guessed. Lavender looked relieved again.

“What kind of—oh,” Regulus breathed.

“Oh?” Sirius asked.

“The Unspeakables,” Regulus said. “You’re an Unspeakable.” Lavender rolled her hands around each other, as if to press him to keep going. “And so is Ron, isn’t he?”

Lavender laughed in triumph.

“That’s how he went missing, it was something to do with his job,” Regulus said and this time it wasn’t a question.

On Christmas day, Harry showed up at Black Manor.

“Harry, what are you doing here?” Regulus asked him, though he was up and pulling Harry into a hug before he even finished his sentence.

“I know you guys said I didn’t have to come, but I’ve really missed you,” Harry said kindly. Sirius was oddly relieved, he’d been doing everything he could to protect Harry from what was going on. “Plus I wanted to talk to a few people about Ron. I know you said it had something to do with Unspeakables, but there has to be something we can do.”

That evening, after a day of subdued Christmas festivities, Hermione announced that she was going to go looking for Ron. Harry apparently offered to go with her, the two had been talking about it all day in private, but Hermione said that she needed to go alone.

Regulus didn’t appear to know how to take the news and he was still clearly ruminating on it a few hours later when Hermione and Harry had both gone off to bed and Regulus and Sirius were lying on the couches they’d been sleeping on for months. Sirius was seconds away from asking his brother what he was thinking when they heard a door open and close. Regulus moved so fast that Sirius thought he’d apparated.

His little brother sprinted through the corridors toward the front door, both of them sliding around a corner just in time to see James and Remus setting down their bags, exhausted looks on their faces. Regulus threw himself at James, practically flying through the air into James's arms. James caught him with a grin and Sirius forced himself to avert his eyes just in case he was about to see something indecent.

He approached Remus at a slower pace, but when he felt Remus's warm, strong hands curl around him, he just about collapsed.

"You're home," Sirius breathed.

Remus smiled, gentle and kind, as he always was. "I'm home."

2003

Regulus woke clinging to James, his heart pounding and his hands shaking. He was sure he had a nightmare but the memory of it vanished the moment he opened his eyes. He was digging his fingers so desperately into James's side that he was sure there would be bruises later. The thought filled him with James and he carefully untangled himself from the man. James used to be the clingy one but lately, it almost felt like James was pulling away.

Regulus didn't understand why but something in James had changed and Regulus felt like he was being left behind, just really, really slowly.

The changes had been gradual but Regulus thought they may have started around the first full moon of the year in mid-January. Remus's search for the werewolves had lead him to Peru where he and James met a woman named Ines. They'd thought they'd been looking for a man based on the diaries, but Ines was the real person they needed to meet.

She was a leader and teacher on werewolf transformations, Peru had far more werewolves than England did, though none of them had known that before. She didn't know anything about the disappearances Remus was researching but that didn't mean she wasn't helpful. She was the heir to sacred knowledge that had been passed down from before the Spanish colonized South America, knowledge that directly correlated to a werewolf's tie to the moon.

Regulus didn't understand it very well, mostly because Remus and James refused to explain it. They just kept giving each other looks like they were sharing a private joke and telling Sirius and Regulus to wait until the full moon came.

On the full moon night, the four of them went outside onto the grounds of the manor as they usually did. While waiting for the moon to rise, James began telling a very detailed story about a meal he'd eaten at a local fishing hut while he was traveling. The meal was apparently so good that it had brought him to tears.

He spent far too long talking about it, describing every single ingredient as if the others were going to start taking notes. He spoke for so long that Regulus nearly missed the moment the

moon rose. It shown down from the sky, its silver light making James look ethereal, but strangely, nothing happened. No screaming, no bones breaking. Nothing.

"What's going on?" Sirius mumbled confusedly. James and Remus shared another secret grin and then Remus began explaining to them all they'd learned with Ines—all the rituals they'd gone through, the months of meditation and internal work on their relationship to their wolf.

"You no longer have to transform?" Regulus asked softly once Remus was finished.

James nodded happily. It was an amazing moment, something that had weighed so heavily on them for years had now been fundamentally changed. Not only did this mean Remus and James wouldn't have to endure the bone breaking and horror of each full, but it also meant that Remus could potentially help more werewolves when he found them. Remus was also hopeful that this newfound connection and understanding of his werewolf form would allow him to find the missing wolves.

Regulus had been elated that night, as had the rest of them, but since then James had slowly started to drift. They spent a little less time together and a little more time apart, they stopped having sex as frequently, they missed each other for meals, and more often than not, Regulus woke alone next to a cold spot on the bed.

He knew that James was busy getting back to the school. Hermione had stayed on to help with the growing number of students, but Regulus knew she was getting restless and she probably wouldn't come back after the new year. Regulus was also busy, visiting the Ministry nearly everyday meeting with people.

But they'd been busy before they'd still made time for each other. Now it felt like James would rather spend time with someone else. He spent a lot of time with Remus and Sirius, saying he was helping Remus with the search. Harry and Draco had finally moved back to England after years spent traveling and James worked to see Harry every single day—it was easy considering Harry had yet to decide what he wanted to do for work, not that Regulus was interested in pressuring him. James also spent an inordinate amount of time with Tonks, which annoyed Regulus to no end, though he refused to say so.

Regulus just felt such a disconnect from James and by the time Christmas came around, it was eating him alive. He kept getting caught up in worst case scenarios of what felt like an inevitable breakup. Regulus would be heartbroken and left behind just like last time. Would everyone in his life finally see how worthless he was? Would he lose his brother again? Would Sirius choose James over him once they were no longer together? Would Remus? Would *Harry*?

He'd made himself sick from thinking more than a handful of times, but that morning, he decided to put his panic and dread aside. If all they had left was Christmas then Regulus was determined to enjoy it.

Or he was at least determined to make sure everyone else enjoyed it.

He was expecting a pretty sizable group for the holiday, as was typical for them, especially given they hadn't had a celebration the year before. Harry and Draco were now living with

them in the manor, which Regulus loved, so he was able to see them first thing when he left the bed. James was still sleeping when he left, but sometimes Regulus wondered if James would have preferred to wake up alone.

Harry was making tea in the kitchen and Draco was sitting at the nearby table reading a copy of the gossip magazine *Padma and Parvati* ran. Ginny was on the front cover, along with the rest of her Quidditch teammates. Pansy Parkinson had just recently started her own clothing company and Ginny was the first person she'd dressed, saying that her fame as a Quidditch player help Pansy's business succeed.

Only a moment after Regulus sat down to join them, Hermione and Ron came through the floo. The previous year Ron had been trapped in an weird time loop caused by his work as an Unspeakable. Apparently they'd been a few weeks out from declaring him legally dead when Hermione showed up. Regulus didn't know all the details—the Unspeakables did love their secrets—but what he did know was that once Ron and Hermione came back, they didn't separate again.

They showed up holding hands and smiling at each other, and that was it.

Regulus greeted them happily, his smile faltering just a bit when James entered the room a second later. Regulus forced himself to look away while James hugged each of them, wishing he was anywhere else. James did not hug Regulus, and Regulus had to be very careful not to let his hurt show.

By the time Sirius and Remus arrived, the room was loud with celebration. The only quiet one, beyond Regulus himself, was Hermione.

"Okay?" Regulus asked.

Hermione nodded, then said, "Do you think we could talk?"

They went for a walk around the manor. It was snowing outside and it would be too miserable to stroll around. Walking inside the manor wasn't bad though, Regulus enjoyed it most days. It kept him from feeling too stir crazy.

"So what's up?" Regulus prompted.

"I got a job offer," Hermione said immediately.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. It's—well, it's exactly what I want. It has to do with law making and reform, I'll get to work alongside the Aurors without actually being one. I'll have close contact with the Minister and all of his staff. It's amazing."

Regulus glanced over at her and waited for her to continue. She didn't though. She tucked her lips in between her teeth, and Regulus understood.

"But you're not going to say yes, are you?"

Hermione sighed. "I don't know. I should, shouldn't I? I've worked so hard for it."

Regulus narrowed his eyes. "What is it you're not telling me?"

Hermione gave him a sidelong look. "Why do you ask that?"

"Because you're not a very good liar, especially not to your friends."

Hermione sighed again. "Very well," she said. "I was offered a position at *The Daily Prophet*."

"That dribble?"

She nodded with a frown.

"And you want to take it?"

She shrugged.

"Oh, you really want to take it."

"I think you might be disturbingly good at reading my mind," she said. Regulus laughed.

"I can be clever too, you know," Regulus said. He waited a beat before continuing. "I think you would be an excellent journalist."

"Yeah?" Hermione asked, her eyes bright.

"Yeah," he said with a grin. He meant it to. Rita was a terrible journalist but Regulus always believed that someone competent working for *The Daily Prophet* would be a collective good for all of them. He couldn't think of anyone better than Hermione.

They headed back toward the party and the moment they entered, the room slowly fell silent. Regulus looked around uneasily. More than a few people were watching him.

"Do it now," Regulus heard Harry whisper, just barely audible.

James cleared his throat. "Regulus," he called and lifted a hand, palm up, gesturing for him to come forward. Regulus's stomach dropped. He was going to do this *here? Now?* He stepped forward at a glacial pace, dragging his feet a bit.

"Yes?" Regulus asked. He could feel everyone in the room watching him but he didn't dare look at them. James wouldn't be this cruel, would he? Regulus felt like he was in free fall.

"I've been wanting to say all of this for a long time," James said, squeezing Regulus's hands, the bad one just a little numb in his grasp. "But I've been waiting for the right moment. After everything that happened last year, I knew I couldn't wait any longer."

James looked nervous and that made Regulus feel even *more* nervous than he was already feeling. His blood was rushing in his ears. Should he run? He was contemplating it. He

probably would have gone through with it had James's hands not tightened.

“Not to mention,” James said, glancing at someone over Regulus's shoulder, “everyone I’ve asked about it has told me that I have to.” He leaned forward to whisper, “They even said they would lock me out if I didn’t do it tonight.”

Regulus couldn't think of anything to say in response. His mouth felt too dry. His vision swam dangerously.

“What?” Regulus said without meaning to.

“Regulus,” James said. “When I was a teenager, I used to fantasize about stealing you away from your family.”

Regulus’s eyebrows jumped up forehead.

“I know it sounds insane, but long before I knew what love meant, all I wanted was to see you happy and cared for. Even after we broke up, I still wished that I could take you away from everything that made you miserable, that I could protect you.”

“James,” Regulus whispered.

“I wish I’d known then what I know now, that wanting you safe and happy, also meant wanting you with me. I wish I'd been able to see it. I’m only lucky that I know it now.”

“I’m confused,” Regulus confessed.

James smiled a little dreamily then dropped to one knee. Regulus thought he was going to pass out. “Do you remember what I said to you in the tent? That first time, when you forgave me.”

“I didn’t have to forgive you,” Regulus whispered, lightheaded and discombobulated.

“I said that I’d loved you for years, that I’d wanted you for years, that I wouldn't survive if you let me have you again and didn't let me stay,” James said. “That's never changed. Even after all the years we’ve been together, all I've ever wanted was you next to me.”

“James?” Regulus said again. He was sure he looked like an idiot.

“Regulus,” James responded. “Will you marry me?”

“You’re not breaking up with me?” Regulus asked immediately. James's mouth dropped open.

“No, of course not,” James said and Regulus realized that he was very, very dumb. “So... will you?”

Regulus choked on a sob, unaware that he'd started crying. “Yes,” he gasped. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

2004

Sirius originally thought his baby brother and James would get married quickly, but after everything that had happened since the proposal, he was a bit relieved that they were still in the planning process. Regulus had suggested a small ceremony at first, but when his bookclub full of girls heard about his idea, they'd laughed him out of the room.

"James told them before he told me," Regulus said rubbing his face in distress.

"James told *everyone* before you," Sirius said. "Even McGonagall knew months before you did. Godric, he carried that ring around in his pocket for months. It was pathetic."

"He did?" Regulus asked, his voice faint.

"Yes," Sirius said with a shake of his head. "Why? Does that surprise you?"

Regulus shrugged. "I never thought he would want to."

"Get married?"

"Marry me," Regulus clarified. "I thought that was only something he would consider with ___"

"How can you be this smart and this dumb at the same time?" Sirius asked. Regulus scowled. "He probably would have married you the first time around had things not gotten so fucked. He married Lily because there was a war on and everything felt urgent, but he was always going to marry you once he got you back. Even I knew that and he refused to talk to me about you two for the first *two years* of your relationship out of some misguided respect for us."

"Oh," Regulus said. "Did Harry know?"

"Harry's the one that made him do it on Christmas. He was sick of listening to James complain. He kept avoiding you thinking that was going to make it easier. As if you'd ever say no," Sirius added with a laugh.

"Oh," Regulus said again.

Sirius knew what it was like to feel unlovable, he and Regulus had the same childhood after all, but he'd failed to realize until that year how much that feeling still plagued his little brother. Sirius made an agreement with himself, and then with Remus when he had the chance, to make sure that by the time Regulus got married, he knew how loved he was.

Regulus started wedding planning in February but it was a long process, and Sirius knew it would be another year before they managed it.

Things got busy for all of them that year anyway and soon Regulus and James's wedding fell to the back of his mind. In May, McGonagall pulled Sirius into a meeting and asked him if he would be interested in becoming Head of Gryffindor house. Sirius was touched, but he had to know, "Why not Remus? He's a much better pick."

“Remus is an excellent professor.” Sirius grinned, he loved it when people complimented his Remus. “And I have no doubt that he would be an excellent Head of House, but I believe he is going to be too busy next year to manage both roles.”

At the time, McGonagall had been hinting toward the book Remus was planning to write. He hadn't told Sirius about it yet, waiting for it to be a surprise, but he'd informed McGonagall of his plan. She was in full support, offering him anything he needed to complete the project. What she didn't know was that Remus would be far busier during the next term for a very different reason.

In June, Remus finally caught a break in his hunt for the werewolves. During one of the full moons, a night they still spent with Regulus and James out of habit, Remus fell asleep and started to hear whispers.

“That must have been what I was hearing years ago when I was calling out in my sleep,” Remus told them the next morning. “Only I was too blocked from my werewolf side and I couldn't remember them once I woke up.”

The whispers led him to somewhere in the Netherlands. He'd wanted to go alone, but Sirius and James refused to let him do it. They didn't want him to be in danger. Remus dug his feet in, his face already drawn with that stubborn pout, but Regulus ultimately was the reason Remus agreed not to go alone. Sirius didn't know what he said to Remus but after they had one conversation in private, Remus was agreeing to let them go.

It was good that he did because they ended up stumbling on an illegal magical research center run by an Kevalin, the Unspeakable who'd kept James prisoner years before. He wasn't so much a man, not anymore, more like a group of compiled magical cores, all lifted from the dead and sewn together in one body.

Based on James's description, he looked far more horrifying than he had when James knew him. Sirius could barely look at him, his misshapen body making his stomach turn.

It was good for James, Sirius thought, they he finally was able to come face to face with the man who'd tortured him. It took all four of them to defeat him, but Regulus had dealt the killing blow. Once he was dead, they were free to search his lab, discovering dozens of werewolves in varying states of survival.

They called the Aurors right away, well aware that they were in over their heads.

Remus finally found Clea though she was half dead and did not survive the rescue. Remus was devastated. “She didn't even make it to the hospital. If we had come just a *day* earlier.”

Sirius did his best to comfort him, but there were more pressing matters. Most important was the one werewolf they found that was far younger than the others. She looked like a toddler and when they used a spell to detect her age, they found that she was only fifteen months old. She had a bite down her entire right side, painting a very ugly picture of what happened to her. She had a fluffy head of blonde hair and eyes that were such a dark brown they almost looked black. She was perfect.

She was taken to the hospital right after she was found so that the Aurors could find her parents—apparently Kevalin had brought her there when she was still human and locked her in a room with a transforming werewolf—but after two months of searching, they discovered her parents were dead. She'd been taken from an orphanage. A muggle orphanage.

She was muggleborn, Sirius realized. Though Kevalin didn't know that if his notes were to be believed. He wanted to see how a muggle infant would handle a bite and transformation. She almost certainly would have died had that been the case, only her unknown magic saved her.

“What's going to happen to her now? It's not like they can take her back to a muggle orphanage,” Sirius asked. Remus bit down hard on his lip.

"I don't know," he said, but he looked worried and not just about the girl. He looked the kind of worried where he wouldn't meet Sirius's eyes, like he was afraid Sirius would be upset. Sirius may have been, years ago, when he was overwhelmed easily, but he was a different man now. He reached out and grabbed Remus's hand.

“We could raise her,” Sirius whispered.

Everything happened quickly after that. They didn't even have time to update anyone before they were bringing her home.

A few days later, they took her to Black Manor. Sirius was shaking so badly he could barely stand, though he wasn't sure why. When he saw Regulus, and Regulus saw the baby, he nearly fell over.

“Who is that?” Regulus asked, his face pale.

“She's—” She hadn't had a name, even at the orphanage. She was taken too young. “She's our daughter.”

Regulus blinked twice, then surprised Sirius more than he'd ever been surprised before and held out his arms. "Can I hold her?" he asked gently.

They named her Penelope, Penny for short, breaking the Black family tradition of naming kids after stars, and for a while, they moved back into Black Manor. They both had to go back to Hogwarts and needed extra help to care for her. Regulus and James were busy, but they volunteered to help immediately. Only a week later, when Sirius took her to the monthly Black family dinners that were still going on years after Regulus had organized them, Narcissa offered to move into Black Manor to help as well.

A month after the Hogwarts term began, Lucius was freed from prison, ending his ten year sentence a few years earlier. He was a shell of the man he'd once been, but he was determined to spend time with his family now that he was free, so he moved into Black Manor as well.

Draco and Harry were already living there. They'd talked a few times about moving out but the manor was so massive that they could go days without seeing anyone if they wanted to. Draco had started studying for his N.E.W.T.s while Harry had taken up a position with

Ollivander. It surprised everyone when he'd done it, but Harry wasn't interested in explaining himself. He knew what he wanted to do and he didn't care what anyone else thought of it.

That Christmas, though Regulus and James weren't quite married yet, they looked more in love than ever. They doted on Penny most of the day and spent the evening celebrating the new werewolf reform Regulus had finally passed through the Ministry. It was a huge deal, though Sirius hadn't known all the details of it until after it was passed.

It changed the laws about werewolf employment and the treatment they could receive at magical hospitals. It allowed them to attend schools and broadened the access to Wolfsbane Potion. There was so much more too it, so much that would have helped Remus during those long years when Sirius was in Azkaban.

"How did you finally manage it?" Remus asked.

James started laughing and Regulus smacked him in the shoulder.

"I had to—stop laughing!" he hissed through a smile. James valiantly tried to hold in his laughter, though Sirius could see his face turning red with the effort. "I had to form an—" he sighed, "unlikely alliance."

Remus shared a look with Sirius.

"An unlikely alliance?" Sirius asked. James looked over at Harry and the two of them fell into another fit of giggles. Regulus rolled his eyes. "Who is it?"

"Shall I tell him?" Regulus drawled. James could barely answer with how he was laughing, but he managed a nod. Regulus turned back to Sirius with a long-suffering sigh. "It was Cedric Diggory."

2005

Harry and Draco were together for eight years before he finally admitted to himself that he had something of a wing kink. Draco, the smug bastard, knew well before him and always shot him a sharp smirk whenever Harry would beg him to let his wings out.

He was doing that again. It was Christmas morning and the snow outside was falling hard enough that they couldn't see much of anything through the windows. Harry was pinned to the bed, his legs spread as Draco slowly lowered himself onto Harry's cock. They didn't always do it like this, Draco was quite fond of bending Harry over just about any surface he could find, but sometimes, on slow mornings, Draco loved to trap Harry beneath him and ride him until Harry was near tears.

"Please, I want to touch them," Harry gasped.

"Beg me then," Draco taunted, as he always did. That taunting voice used to make him so angry when they were kids, but now it just made him harder.

He begged, as Draco requested, and when Draco's wing stretched out behind him, wide and elegant, Harry came with a long moan.

He was grateful they had strong silencing charms around the room, Draco had added them himself. They'd had the manor to themselves for a few weeks leading up to Christmas day, but now the place would be packed again.

Narcissa and Lucius had moved out in the middle of summer, going back to the ground where Malfoy Manor had once stood. The Fiendfyre was still burning and they had to hire several wizards to come and put it out, but once that was done, they were left with an empty field burnt clear of dark magic.

"They're going to rebuild the manor," Draco told Harry.

Harry hesitated. "Do you want to go with them?"

"No," Draco said immediately. "I wasn't happy there, near the end, and I—I haven't missed it." He leaned over and kissed Harry softly on the corner of his lips. "I want to be wherever you are."

"And if I wanted to move into Malfoy Manor the second?" Harry joked.

Draco didn't laugh but he looked fond. "Then I guess I'll have to adapt to living without you."

Draco's parents still came back to visit periodically, but since Sirius and Remus had moved back into their home near Hogwarts, Narcissa spent a lot more time going up there to take care of Penny.

It had been a good year overall—Theo had started working at Hogwarts as a potions professor after he'd done all he wanted to working for Fred and George, Neville and Hannah Abbott had started dating, as had Ginny and Pansy, *thank Merlin*. Harry didn't think he could take another year of them hurting each other's feelings and having blowout fights that somehow required both Harry *and* Draco's input.

Penny was growing well also. Harry had never been around a baby except in the brief moments that he visited with Bill and Fleur, but Penny was incredible. She was smart and bright and she *loved* Harry. Remus had asked Harry to be godfather to her a bit after Christmas the year before and Harry had nearly teared up at the idea. It was almost like having a little sister.

The only real bad thing that happened that year was in May when Regulus collapsed in the middle of giving a talk at the Wizengamot. He'd started convulsing on the floor of the Ministry. Sirius had been called to Saint Mungo's right after it happened since most people still thought he was Regulus's father. By the time James and Harry made it there, Sirius was a wreck. Harry and James weren't doing so well themselves.

"Regulus is going to be okay," James told all of them later that evening. "The curses he endured during the war have finally started to take their toll. We're going to have to increase

treatment he's getting and he'll," James swallowed several times like his throat was too constricted to do it properly. "He'll never be completely healed but there is some new research coming out of MAGUSA that sounds promising."

It was a difficult summer for James and Regulus, both of them trying to manage the health problems Regulus was dealing with, but luckily it didn't end up affecting their wedding plans. Harry had worried it would and he wasn't happy about it.

He'd finally put his foot down the year before, demanding that James get on with things. "You might not have forever," Harry told him.

"Is that a threat?" James asked.

"It can be if you want it to be," Harry said. "Regulus deserves to be married and you waiting around isn't doing anyone any good."

Parvati and Padma planned the wedding for late August. It was extremely extravagant, every room in Black Manor was decorated, and it seemed like half the wizarding world was in attendance. Harry didn't know more than half the people who were there.

Harry had thought James was going to ask him to be his best man, and though he knew he would be touched by it, he'd decided early on that that wasn't how things should be, and since James couldn't be trusted to do things alone, Harry had to do it for him.

"You should ask Sirius to be your best man," Harry told him.

"Yeah?" James asked questioningly.

"Yeah," Harry said. "He'll be hurt if you don't and you were his best man. It only makes sense."

"Okay," James said slowly, then seemed to warm to the idea. "Okay, that's a good idea."

A week later, Regulus quietly asked if Harry might consider, if it wasn't too much of an inconvenience, being his best man and Harry had tackled him with a hug.

"Yes! Of course! I'm so glad you asked me!" Harry shouted and then very carefully pretended that he didn't notice Regulus crying.

They asked Remus to officiate the wedding making the wedding part fundamentally the same five people as Sirius and Remus's wedding. James had thought that was hilarious.

Narcissa and Andromeda had a heavy hand in the wedding plan as well, though it was Parvati and Padma's show, the Black sisters had a lot of experience planning parties. Draco had even agreed to help, spending long hours drinking tea with a group of women as they planned the wedding of the century, or so Parvati and Padma were calling it in their magazine.

Harry didn't cry at the ceremony, but Sirius did. He openly sobbed the entire time and when it was over, Remus dragged him into a tight hug like he couldn't help himself. Harry and Draco

had danced at the wedding, twice by themselves, and three times with Penny squished between them.

After his dance with James, Regulus had what seemed to be an endless list of people who wanted to dance with him. Luna and Lavender and Hermione and Ron and so many more it felt like it would never end. James danced with a few people, Narcissa once, Andromeda twice, and Tonks for three full songs, but then he found a seat near the wall of the ballroom and sat down to gaze out at his husband lovingly.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Harry said after he left Penny in Draco's arms and went to sit next to his father.

"Am I?" James asked, suddenly worried.

Harry snickered. "Say thank you, Harry," Harry said in a sing-song voice.

James laughed. "Thank you, Harry."

"Oh, it was nothing," Harry drawled. "Couldn't let my two dads figure it out for themselves. It would have taken another twenty years." He turned to smirk at James and found him staring back with his mouth wide open. "What?"

"You said two dads," James said.

Harry blushed a little but raised his chin proudly. "Well, yeah, you and Regulus. He's my father too."

For a second he thought James was upset, but then his lip wobbled slightly and his eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, dad, don't cry," Harry said fondly, letting James hug him tight enough to hurt.

"I think you should tell Regulus what you told me," James said.

"What?"

"That you consider him your father," James said.

"He knows."

"He might not," James said. "I think he'd really like to hear it from you."

James was right. Regulus didn't know—the idiot—and he was very touched to hear Harry say it. By the end of the night, Harry was so stuffed full of touching moments that he needed to sleep for a week. Draco had dragged him to bed that night and shagged him until the sun rose, pressing Harry's face into the pillows as he knelt behind him, just the way Harry liked it.

James and Regulus had left for their honeymoon a few weeks after the wedding. They would have gone right away but Regulus had to stick around to finish passing some of the elvish

welfare laws he'd been working on for years. It was a big win, freedom for every single elf in the country, and Regulus was finally able to take the vacation he deserved.

They returned the day before Christmas and Harry was looking forward to spending the day with them. He'd been so busy at the shop designing a new set of wands for the next round of first years—he had a knack for wandmaking, and using the Elder Wand (something he thought was a myth but James informed him not only existed but had been left to him by Dumbledore) made him even better—and he was looking forward to the day off.

About halfway through their morning, when Harry had just started eating his second serving of cinnamon buns, an unknown owl came through the wards. Kreacher opened the window for him and let the owl fly straight in to Harry's side, holding out its leg for Harry to unravel the note tied there.

He sent the room a questioning look but no one seemed to know what it was. He set his plate down and carefully untied the note, rolling it out on his hand.

Harry,

I know it's been a long time. I hope you don't burn this letter. I know I owe you a lot of apologies and I'm happy to give them, but you see, I need your help. Five years ago my wife and I had a daughter, I was going to send you a letter about it but I never got around to it. Everything was normal until a few months ago and then weird stuff started happening around the house. Weird stuff like when you were a kid and mum would get furious. I think my daughter might be like you. I don't know what to do. I know the way Mum handled it wasn't right, I'm old enough to know that now, but Mum and Dad don't want to see her anymore.

Please, can you help me?

Dudley

2006

Nine years after the war, Kreacher died.

It happened three weeks before Christmas and Regulus was so rocked by it that he hadn't gotten out of bed to do anything but use the loo and go to Kreacher's funeral since he discovered his cold, still little body. He was an old elf, he'd been old since Regulus was born, but Regulus had never considered the possibility that he might die. Not until it happened.

No one else seemed to understand why he was distraught.

Regulus had screamed when he found him and James had come sprinting into the room, surely afraid that Regulus's curse damage was affecting him again. Regulus didn't remember what happened next, all he knew was that one moment his throat was closing as he stared down at the body of one of his oldest friends, and the next he was slowly dressing in an expensive pair of black wizard robes for the funeral.

A group of other elves came, Dobby included. Only a few of them had ever met Kreacher but they knew Regulus was the one who'd been fighting for elf freedom for the last few years and they respected him enough to come pay their respects.

Sirius and James were on either of Regulus's sides, but he could barely feel them. He thought he spoke at the funeral, but he didn't know for sure. At one point, Luna came up to him and hugged him for long enough that he nearly collapsed into her, exhausted by grief. Blaise was with her, which Regulus would consider interesting months later when he learned that the two of them were dating, but at the time, he couldn't bring himself to feel anything but broken.

James had taken care of him as he wallowed in his sadness. Crying and sleeping for long hours, growing disgusting from his lack of bathing. He was have starved to death if it wasn't for James bringing him three meals a day and forcing him to eat.

He didn't make him get out of bed until Christmas morning. Regulus was still resistant then, but James was warm and strong and handsome and Regulus let him carry him to the shower and relished in the feel of James's fingers against his scalp as he washed his very dirty hair. He cried again in the shower, even though he felt like he'd cried all the tears he ever would, and James just help him, rubbing his back and kissing his forehead.

It was a quiet Christmas that year. Regulus wasn't sure he could entertain guests and James seemed to know that. Harry and Draco were there, of course, since they lived in the manor, Narcissa, Lucius, and Andromeda came in the late afternoon, and Sirius, Remus, and Penny joined them in the evening. There was some event happening at Hogwarts that Christmas so they weren't able to come earlier. Regulus didn't know or care what the event was.

Sirius set Penelope on the ground when they arrived and she ran right toward Regulus, crawling into his lap and placing her tiny fingers against his cheeks.

"Reggie's sad?" she asked in that gentle voice of hers. Regulus nearly started sobbing again. Penelope looked a bit tired, though they were still a few weeks out from the full moon. She was too young to learn how to control her transformations—Remus thought she'd probably have to be an adult before that happened—and she was still a year out from being old enough to try Wolfsbane potion. The full moon nights were rough, but Remus and James started transforming with her, and Sirius and Regulus were always there in their animagus forms.

"Yes, Penelope," Regulus said, he was the only one who called her by her full name, "I'm still a bit sad."

Penelope frowned and then threw her arms around his neck. He hugged her back, tears in his eyes, his glance meeting Sirius's over her shoulder. He looked like he was crying a bit himself. He smiled when he noticed Regulus looking at him and Regulus smiled back. If their mother could see them now...

Ten years after Voldemort died, on Christmas day of 2007, Harry finally proposed to Draco. It was all planned, had been for months, but the moment he dropped to his knee, Draco started laughing.

Harry's face dropped into a frown. "That's not what I was expecting," Harry mumbled.

Draco shook his head, though he was still laughing. "No, no," he said breathlessly. "Look!" He reached into the pocket of his dress trousers—he always wore elegant clothes, just like Regulus—and pulled out a small box. He opened it immediately, revealing a black ring covered in white diamonds.

"No way," Harry gasped, still on one knee. "You were going to ask me?"

Draco nodded. "Will you—"

"No! I get to go first! I'm already on one knee!"

"Oh, please don't be ridiculous!"

"I swear they bicker more than we do," James whispered to Regulus. They were sharing one of the large chairs near the fireplace. The room was stuffed full of people they loved, people who loved them back, and Regulus felt contentment settle over him.

He watched Draco and Harry argue jokingly before kissing and placing engagement rings on each others fingers. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Hannah, Seamus, Dean, and Crabbe were whooping loudly in celebration. Pansy was clapping almost sarcastically, as were Theo, Lavender, and Parvati, though Regulus could see how pleased they looked. Luna was jumping up and down in excitement, while Blaise was busy watching her like he'd never seen anyone so beautiful.

Regulus felt tears prick at his eyes and he glanced quickly at James, a confession already on his tongue before he realized it. "James," he said quietly.

"Yes?" James asked, turning his full attention on Regulus.

"I have to tell you something," Regulus said, his chest growing tight.

"Okay." James looked a bit concerned, but his hand tightened on Regulus's shoulder comfortingly.

Regulus took a deep breath. "I don't want kids," Regulus told him.

James's eyebrows furrowed. He opened his mouth to reply right as another loud laugh when through the room, drawing Regulus's attention. Draco had dipped Harry into a kiss and he was gripping roughly onto Draco's shoulders to keep from falling. Regulus smiled and turned back to James.

"Any more kids," Regulus corrected.

James's face brightened slightly. "Just us?"

Regulus nodded once, pressing himself against James so he could enjoy having his home filled with love for a little longer.

It was strange, to be sitting there after so many years.

He'd thought he was going to die. He'd thought it couldn't be helped, that it was inevitable, that it was necessary.

He'd thought he was going to die.

But he was living.

He was living.

Chapter End Notes

i cannot believe it's over.

thank you so much for reading.

i started this story at a very weird time in my life when i felt useless and directionless, so much of my life has changed since then, mostly in good ways, and it's strange to look back on the story that has carried me through all of it. regulus, sirius, and harry were the caretakers of all my heavy feelings over the last two years and it feels like mourning an old friend and having to say goodbye to them. i hope you've enjoyed your time with them as much as i did.

to those of you who read this as a wip, who left comments and kudos, who messaged me on tumblr and watched all my insane tiktoks, thank you so much. i dont believe this story would have ever been finished if it wasn't for you guys. you guys kept me going when i felt like writing held no purpose or when i felt like no one cared about the stories i wanted to share.

this story is finished now, but i may, periodically, add one shots or short stories to the golden king collection. there are a few characters that i have more to write about, so if that is a thing you're interested in, i recommend subscribing to either the golden king collection or to my main ao3 account as i'm unlikely to update this fic again except to make edits.

as always, you can find me on tumblr, instagram, bluesky, and tiktok for as long as the americans have access to it. my username is and shall remain maladaptivewriting on all platforms.

<3

Works inspired by this one

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